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Old Hickory; OR, PANDY ELLIS'S SCALP.

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AUTHOR OF "RATTLING RUBE," "ROARING
RALPH ROCKWOOD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE FOREST CHASE.

"TARNEL snakes and bufflers! This here are jest the worst event of my life. Time was when Blue Beans could hold his own with any man living, and chaw up a stove just as easy as not, but on that venison I own I'm dead beat, chief. Why, bless me, Powder Flash, if I wouldn't like to swear that this buck is the identical one that entered the Ark with Father Noah, though I expect you don't know a thing about it. Hang it all, chief, I'll light up my pipe here, and have the satisfaction of seeing you chaw away."

"Better than nothing; Powder Flash have strong teeth; chaw, chaw, chaw. Blue Beans smoke, chief eat up whole deer."

"I'd give a heap to see ye do it. No use tryin' to deceive me, chief; ye can't make black white. That venison is tough as Injy rubber. I 'member the time Ralph Rockwood and this chicken got lost up among the snow-covered hills near Red river. Game was awful scarce, and we came so near going under that we had to cook our old moccasins. I tell ye, chief, they was a luxury beside that venison. You can chaw away, but I know ye're just doing it for spite, so the old buck won't quite get the best of ye. It's mighty plain to me, however, that he's having his revenge for your shootin' him. Thar ye chaw, chaw, chaw. Well, Injins are obstinate as mules, every day," with which Blue Beans lapsed into silence.

His companion smiled a trifle, but kept up his continual munching upon the large piece of tough venison that he held between his teeth. He was a full-blooded Indian, a chief among the Comanches, whose intimate relations with Blue Beans had existed for several years.

The hunter had done him a signal service, for which the chief swore eternal friendship, and together they had roamed the prairies since that day.

Blue Beans sat and watched the chief with an amused smile upon his face, but nothing could disturb the serenity of Powder Flash, who munched away with the equanimity of a quartz mill, although it was extremely doubtful whether he extracted any satisfaction from the leathery substance.

Around them stretched the great forest, which ended only at the base of the mountains behind which they had seen the glorious sun sink when evening came on.

The silence of the night was unbroken save by the distant howl of some prowling wolf on the war-path for plunder, or perhaps the shrill laugh of the cowardly coyote that kept in the darkest spots of the wood.

Occasionally a lonely owl that had perched itself upon some neighboring dead tree, gave vent to a dismal hoot, that rung out with startling distinctness through the stilly darkness of the night.

To all appearances these two strangely-assorted chums were alone in the heart of this western wilderness, but the thought seemed in no way to bother them.

Blue Beans was a man somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty years of age, but who still retained the vigor of youth. His good-humored face was partly covered by a grizzly beard that gave him rather a rough appearance; but one needed only to glance into his merry blue eyes to be convinced of his honesty.

Powder Flash was garbed more like a white hunter than a Comanche chief, but in any habiliments his noble form would have rendered him a striking personage.

A small fire had been started, for there was but little fear of detection, as they had pitched their camp in a sort of depression or hollow, which would prevent any possibility of the blaze being seen at a distance.

The deer Powder Flash had brought down just at evening; it proved to be the toughest piece of meat that human jaws ever wrestled with, and Rube's ached as if he had just come from the dentist's.

It did him a world of good to sit there and watch his iron-jawed and determined comrade make way with the old buck.

Suddenly Blue Beans gave a perceptible start, although he continued smoking calmly.

"Hist!" said he, in a whisper.

"Blue Beans, spit um out. Powder Flash hear um even if chaw, chaw, chaw."

The chief did not even look toward his companion while uttering these words in a low tone, and any one ten feet away would have been ignorant of what was passing.

"Thar's enemies up in the trees over yonder, old man; heap of 'em, too. I seen their painted bodies a-glistenin' in the fire-light just now. They 're watchin' us, chief; their eyes are fixed on ye like as if they knowed who ye were and had a spite to work out. Shouldn't be a bit surprised if they were some of Buffalo Horn's critters, and ye know he'd give a wheen to lay hands on you an' me."

"What Blue Beans mean to do?" asked the chief, with his face still turned away from his companion, and his jaws working like a modern sausage-chopper.

Evidently there was not much scare to either of them.

"Thar's no mistake about the matter; we must make a run for it, old boy. When you hear me yell out, 'Now!' do you get behind that tree like a streak of greased lightning, or else there won't be enough of ye left to fill a



NO SOONER HAD THE MOUNTAINEER READ IT THROUGH THAN HE BURST INTO A HEARTY LAUGH.

'bacca pipe, for them reds have got a dead bead on us, chief."

As he spoke these last words, Blue Beans arose to his feet. The pipe was emptied in a careless way, and stuck into his belt. Then the hunter raised his arms above his head, giving a tremendous yawn at the same time, as though he was exceedingly tired.

"Now!"

The word fell from his lips with the same abruptness of a ball discharged from a gun. As he spoke, Blue Beans pounced upon his rifle, that lay upon the ground, like a hawk descends upon a dove-cote, and then sprang behind an enormous tree that grew close at hand.

Nor was the Comanche chief less rapid in his movements, even though he was seated upon the ground when the word was given. He was rightly named, for his gun was in his hands, and himself on the way to join Blue Beans, almost like a flash. Several guns were discharged, and the bullets plowed up the ground the two had so lately occupied, for the Indians, disconcerted by this sudden move, could not help banging away, even though it was evident that their balls would do no damage.

When the chief gained the shelter of the huge tree, he found his companion there, crouching in the shadow, and peering around the trunk in search of their enemies.

"What do, Blue Beans?" asked the Indian.

"Run for it, chief. Wait—give me a fair chance. One, two, three, the devil take the hindmost—go!" and with the last word they sped away, side by side, like two phantom figures.

A terrific howl from the rear, and then the pattering of many feet, told the two friends that they were being hotly pursued.

They ran like race-horses, and kept well together, which in itself was rather remarkable, considering the many obstacles that came in their way.

It was not pitch dark in the forest, else both pursuers and pursued would have met with many disasters, for it kept them pretty busy leaping over fallen trees and stumps, and avoiding those that stood erect.

Whether the fugitives were the better woodsmen, or were naturally gifted with stronger eyes, one cannot say, but, while they ran on undisturbed, their pursuers began to decrease in number slowly.

One fellow took a sudden notion to use his nose for a plow, judging by the way in which he glided along on it after tripping over a stone.

A second began hugging a tree as if it was his dearest friend, while a third vanished from view in a hole left by the roots of a gigantic tree being torn bodily out of the ground by a Northern.

Blue Beans could not note these several catastrophes, but he readily understood that the number of their pursuers had decreased one-half. There could not be over two or three in pursuit, and the idea of running from them was absurd.

A word to Powder Flash that was well understood by that ever-ready individual, and the two came to a sudden halt, crouching behind some bushes that promised friendly shelter.

Ten seconds had hardly passed before several shadowy figures came rushing up at a furious pace. When the hostile Indians had all shot by them like so many phantom racers, the two friends arose.

Powder Flash began to chaw away at his tough venison at the point where he had left off, much to the amusement of his friend, who declared that even a moderate earthquake would hardly disturb the equanimity of the chief, all of which Powder Flash listened to in sober silence, only remarking in the end:

"Chief say um eat whole deer. Do it, if teeth no fall out. Blue Beans keep watch of um," at which the hunter laughed again, as if the joke really was comical.

CHAPTER II.

A PREMIUM ON PANDY ELLIS'S TOP-KNOT.

THE glorious sun was nearing the far-distant mountain-tops in the west, and his slanting but still-powerful rays forced an entrance through the branches of the forest trees.

Three hunters were striding through the woods upon this afternoon, the foremost of whom bent over occasionally as if to examine some marks that were deeply imbedded in the ground.

All of them were garbed in the habiliments of western rangers, wearing suits of buck-skin and Indian moccasins. Their head-gear was pos-

sessed of a difference, that, to say the least, was venerable.

The leader had on a cap made up in a unique fashion from squirrel skins, with several bushy tails dangling down his back. Just behind him came a strange-looking man, whose head-covering consisted of an old white beaver hat that had seen rough usage, judging from its appearance. Probably the hunter had donned it in a spirit of fun, for he was one of the oldest and best-known rangers of the border.

The last of this tramping trio was one whose appearance was most striking. He wore a large felt hat that had once been a delicate cream-color, but which the combined forces of sun, wind, dirt and rain, had transformed to a russet brown.

This effectually shaded his face, but when it was removed it gave a view of a weazen little face, with sparkling eyes and a gray mustache. That set of features was well-known on the border.

The leader of this trio, he with the squirrel cap, was Rocky Mountain Joe. Behind him was the no-less celebrated Roaring Ralph Rockwood, the great "Rooster from the Colorado Canyon," and the hindmost no other than famous old Bolly Wherrit, the chum of Pandi Ellis the prairie prince.

Rocky Joe was a noted trailer and it was by the united voices of the others that he took his place at the head.

Bolly had not seen his eccentric old chum for over six months, as he had been East, seeing the sights among the large cities, and he found it hard to get on Pandi's trail.

Not that it was difficult to find tracks of the veteran prairie prince. The very first town in the South-west that he and his two traveling companions struck, they heard of a terrible fight Pandi Ellis had had with a lot of desperadoes, who, hearing of his identity, thought they would perform a good deed for their class, by "wiping him out."

The assault was wholly from their side, and Pandi was taken unawares, but he was always prepared for such work. When the three rangers asked the result, their informant quietly took them out of town, and pointed to four freshly-made graves.

Nothing more was needed; the reply was the eloquence of silence.

In other places they heard of the old ranger, but he was still alive at the last reckoning.

Through the wood the three hunters tramped, with the sky turning to a beautiful crimson in the far West, where the sun was sinking behind the hills for his night's rest.

Rocky Joe bent over to see the trail, while the others kept their eyes about them.

"Hold hard thar!" said Roaring Ralph, all of a sudden, and the three came to a pause.

The trailer was discovered to have found something of more than ordinary interest in the marks upon the ground, for he got down on his knees and laid his hand upon the trail, as if afraid of losing the place, before he would raise his eyes.

Roaring Ralph was gazing intently at something on the trunk of a tree not ten feet beyond. He took several steps forward and then found his suspicions confirmed. It was a piece of paper, nailed to the tree, the bark of which had been chopped away in this particular spot.

Bolly and Roaring Ralph saw that the paper bore the writing of a white man. Their forest teaching could tell them that it had been placed here after the great storm of a month before, but Rocky Joe had to be called up to decipher the letters, which were so many hieroglyphics to the two rangers.

No sooner had the mountaineer read it through than he burst into a hearty laugh.

"Bu'st my moccasins if that ain't good now!" he exclaimed.

"Hyar we air, like Patience on a monument, smilin' at grief; at least you'll be grievin' purty soon, Joey, ef ye don't hurry us wid ther translation," growled Bolly.

"I beg your pardon, kimrades. Listen ter the richest joke that was ever panned out on the border," and in a slow tone, so that they could catch the full force of the joke, Rocky Joe read the "Notice."

The language and writing suggested a white man or half-breed, but this was explained by the placard itself. This is the way the famous card ran:

"We the undersigned, chiefs of the great Sioux nation, do offer as a reward, one hundred buffalo robes, fifty black fox skins, and two hundred beaver pelts; in addition to this the rifle with a silver-plated stock, a keg of gun-powder, and a barrel of whisky, to the person or persons who will bring in the scalp

of Heavy Knife, otherwise known as Pandi Ellis. This reward will be paid by any one of the following chiefs at their separate camps.

"(Signed:)"

BUFFALO HORN,
"RED CLOUD,"
"CRAZY HORSE,"
"GRASSY CHIEF,"
"YELLOW DOG,"
"BURNT SNAKE, and
"YOUNG-MAN-AFRAID-OF-HIS-HORSES."
"DUSKY JOE, Scribe."

Rocky Mountain Joe read this through from beginning to end, and then turned to survey his comrades. Their faces showed the blankest astonishment.

"Trowers and tomcats!" ejaculated Ralph.

"Thet heats me," murmured Bolly Wherrit, and then with a chuckle that bespoke infinite satisfaction he added, "Thar: the ole man hez reached the top o' his ambition. He allers sed az how he w'd be perfectly happy w'en he c'd git a reward offered for his sculp. Thet thar tickles me, boyees. How they must hate my Pandi! I'm jest dyin' ter see the ole man; hain't set eyes on him these seven months back, but we'll find him jest ther same az ever. I'd know them dirty buck-skins (mine's clean alongside o' 'em) and his face among a thousand. Pandi Ellis never c'd disguise himself from us."

Bolly and his companions had not the slightest idea in the world that these words were overheard, but such was really the fact.

A long lank form crouched in the shadows already gathering in places, and chuckled and shook all over with silent laughter, but never a word escaped his lips, neither did he betray himself to the three old hunters.

"Tell 'ee w'at," exclaimed Bolly at length, after they had stood and admired the workmanship of "Dusky Joe" for several minutes, "thar's sum fun here in store. Joey, do 'ee take down thet leetle paper. Listen ter me, boyees: I sw'ar ter pin it ter the flap o' Buffer Horn's own lodge, an' thet afore many suns hev gone by."

"Fiddles an' fryin'-pans! thet air an' ijee, I must say. I'm wid ye, Bolly!" and Roaring Ralph's hand sought the other's.

"Count me in, every time, boys," said Rocky Mountain Joe, earnestly.

"Jest like ther reckless youngsters," muttered the concealed man to himself.

Rocky Joe had at length succeeded in detaching the paper, which he handed to Bolly Wherrit, who, after folding it up, calmly proceeded to place it away in his pocket.

Little did these three great hunters suspect that the man who had Pandi Ellis's gray scalp in his possession, and was on his way to the Indian town with it, lay not thirty feet away. What they would have done had this fact been made manifest it is difficult to say.

"What about the trail?" asked Rocky Mountain Joe; "thar's something I'd like to show you, boys, only it's got too dark. That critter's got friends among the reds, I reckon."

"Crawlers an' catamounts! the thing's quite probable. Chop me inter mince-meat, an' chuck me inter a soap barrel ef I don't think ye're quite right, Joey. W'en we go ter Buffalo Horn's willage ter hang up the fiddle an' the bow, otherwise thet little paper Bolly kerries, I think we'll come acrost our game thar; shoot me through a waterfall ef I don't. It's me that sez it, Roaring Ralph Rockwood, you bet."

"Wal, then, while Rally an' me go ter hunt out a good campin'-ground, do ye mark the spot whar ye got the last squint at the trail, Joey. Thet willin' hez ter be run ter the airth ef it takes a year, fur w'en Bolly Wherrit makes an oath, he's bound ter kerri it out. Poor feller! who'd 'a' thort thet the very fust news we heerd of gettin' near our ole stampin'-ground, w'd be the death o' pore Tom Grampus. My cuss upon his murderer, thet's w'at I sez!"

The unseen listener started as if this was news to him, but he heard nothing more, for the hunters separated, Joe going back to the spot where he had left the trail.

CHAPTER III.

MYSTERIOUS OLD HICKORY.

In a glen where the undergrowth and trees obstructed the sides, and rendered a passage more than ordinarily difficult, a very small fire crackled and blazed.

It had been built upon a spot that was chosen by wise old Bolly Wherrit, and it is doubtful whether a better could have been found, where the chances of the light's remaining undiscovered were concerned.

Around this blaze the three friends gathered, each with a large piece of juicy venison fastened to the end of a ramrod or stick, and cooking in the heat, while the owner occasionally varied the performance by turning the novel spit.

Bolly was arguing a knotty point with his friends in regard to some law of the border, which seemed to have a special adaptation to their mission in this wild and unfrequented part of the country.

He had just reached a flight of oratorical brilliancy, when the legitimate use of words was entirely forgotten or ignored, and the speaker plunging into his subject with the fire of a Cicero or a Demosthenes, was waving his disengaged arm wildly above his cranium, when a hoarse voice from some unknown quarter ejaculated the single word:

"Hullo!"

The orator immediately sprang to his feet, in which act he was followed by Rocky Mountain Joe. As for the reckless ranger, he continued to be at his ease beside the fire, keeping one eye on his supper, and allowing the other to rove around in search of the owner of that mysterious voice.

Bolly and Joe were staring their amazement, for surely the hail had come from the left hand bank of the ravine, and yet not a sign of a human being could they see.

"Hullo, down thar!"

This time Bolly sighted the dim outlines of a human figure upon the right bank.

"Hullo yerself, stranger!" he answered.

"Room fur wun more?" asked the fellow who had hailed them.

"Allers thet, pervidin' he's a friend."

The man began to approach the fire.

"I reckon I kin under thet category, et least I wull ef wun o' you gents kin 'blige me wid a chav. My 'bacca run out some time back. Ah! t'ank 'ee, ole hoss!"

"My name ain't ole hoss. I'm the guanine, only and unadulterated wild-cat o' the perairies, Bolly Wherrit."

"I've heard o' ye, ole hoss. Shake on it; an' who air these youngsters?" asked the stranger as he grasped Bolly's hand.

The persons indicated might have felt insulted by this term, but the first glance at the new-comer had revealed a tall man, with snow-white hair that fell upon his shoulders and a beard of the same color, that effectually concealed the lower part of his features.

The upper half was shaded by an immense *combrero*, so that all they saw of the stranger's face, was the twinkling of his eyes through the shadow of his broad-rimmed hat.

He was dressed in a new suit of buck-skin that was several degrees too large for his lank frame, and carried weapons that seemed to be of a recent make, for they possessed all the latest improvements.

Bolly took upon himself the task of introducing his two comrades.

"This hyar critter air a roarer from the Colorado canyon, Ralph Rockwood by name. He kin lick his weight ten times over o' reds, w'ich air recommend enuff. T'other chile air Rocky Mountain Joe, who lived alone in the big hills fur five years an' more. Now, stranger, who mout you be? I've never seen yer phiz afore, an' thet's sayin' a heap fur Bolly Wherrit."

The other indulged in a chuckle that seemed to come from his moccasins, and then in his strange, hoarse voice he said:

"Never heard o' me! Wal now, thet's more than passin' strange az—az my ole gran'ther used ter remark. My name hez been a terror ter ther red-skins fur forty years an' more. I'm known az Ole Hickory, leastways thet's wun o' my names, fur I hev heaps o' 'em. I'm death on all o' ther pizen critters, an' no mistake. I'm out hyar on a mission, w'ich air a secret like, but if ye hev no 'jection I wouldn't mind tarryin' along w' ye a spell. Ef thet's goin' ter be ary a scrimmage w' ther reds ye'll find Ole Hickory ar a right smart hand w' his repeatin' rifle, fur he's jest death on scrimmages, an' no mistake."

"B'ars' claws an' bufler-hoofs! Ole man, guv us yer paw! Ye talk like an ancient ranger. True, I never heard o' ye afore, which air my loss, I reckon. Ef ye're in search o' a pard, cling ter me. Thar's my hand on it; it's me that sez it, Roarin' Ralph Rockwood, you bet."

The white-haired ranger took the hand offered to him.

"I hev a chum, ole hoss, but az he hez gone back on me, I reckon you an' I kin hitch teams fur a w'ile without ary a wun being hurt. Now, w'at air ye fellers a-doin' in this glory forsaken part o' ther kentry, ef I ain't impudent in makin' ther inquiry?" inquired Ole Hickory.

"Painters an' powder-horns! not a bit of it, seein' az you an' me have struck up a sorter alliance, 'fensive an' defensive like. Thar war an ole friend of ours named Tom Grampus, w'at war murdered in cold blood by a varmint w'at

we're trailin' down. Then thar's Bolly, w'at wants ter hunt fer his chum, Pandey Ellis. We seen a sign over yonder offerin' a big reward for the ole man's skulp, an' mebbe he's gone under."

"You bet he hez," murmured old Hickory, whose sharp eyes were roaming in every direction at once as it seemed.

"W'at's that ye said?" demanded Ralph.

"Nothin', nothin', I'm in ther habit o' speakin' like ter myself at times, an' hardly know w'en I do it," the new-comer hastened to say.

"That's all right I reckon, pardner. Every man hez his peculiarities, an' I'll sw'ar ye hev got the peskiest croaky voice I ever *did* hear. Grunters an' grub-grinders! don't take exception ter that; I mean it all in fun. It's me that sez it, Roarin' Ralph Rockwood, you bet."

"I'm affired sorry ter hear yer news, chums, fur I knowed ther ole man well, an' many a time we slept under ther same blanket. Thet war w'en I flourished under another name, an' war a vartuous boyee. Poor Tom; never ter see him again! I'm w' ye, heart an' soul, kumrades. Gone ter thet bourne from w'ich no traveler ever returns az—az my gran'ther used ter say."

"Thet gran'ther war a remarkable man, I sh'ud say," averred Bolly Wherrit, dryly.

"Thet he war," croaked Old Hickory with a fearful chuckle.

"Would you mind telling us what you are doing up in this region?" asked Rocky Joe, who seemed to share Bolly's dislike and suspicion of the white-haired man, who kept his face concealed so studiously.

Old Hickory looked confused. He hemmed and hawed a minute, fingered a little bag that was suspended from his shoulder by a strap, rather nervously.

If the three hunters had only known what was in that little bag, wouldn't they have gone almost crazy with fury! The reader might as well know the truth, so that a proper estimation can be had of Old Hickory.

The venerable scoundrel actually had the scalp of old Pandey Ellis in his possession, and was even then on his way to claim the reward offered by the Sioux chiefs!

Where and by what means he had made way with the famous prairie ranger, is not consistent with the interest of my story just now, to relate.

What a reckless rascal this white-haired man must have been to have ventured into the midst of these men, who were the avowed chums of the man whom he had disposed of, and whose gray hair he had in his possession.

Old Hickory invented a plausible story, to the effect that some dastard of a brave belonging to the tribe of Buffalo Horn, had stolen his old rifle and other things from a *cache* where he had hidden them, thus placing him under the necessity of buying an entire new outfit.

True, the new-fangled gun with its sixteen shots would be more serviceable in action than his old one, but there were memories connected with the stolen articles, so that he valued them highly, and intended getting them back again.

Of course they believed his story, all but Bolly, and he eyed the old man in a queer way, although he made no remark.

Roaring Ralph and the new-comer seemed to take to each other immediately, and soon the conversation resumed its wonted course.

Preparations for supper had been slowly progressing all this time, and when the venison was done to a turn, the friends proceeded to dispose of it. Bolly still eyed the venerable man askance, and the latter could but notice it. He muttered something to himself with an amused chuckle, which it was just as well for Bolly's peace of mind that he did not hear. The words of the old sinner might be put down in this fashion:

"I wonder if thar ain't a reward fur thet skulp o' yourn, Bolly Wherrit? Them gray ha's 'd make a beautiful topknot, most ekal ter ther wun in this hyar bag, he! he!"

The man must be a professional scalp-hunter, judging from his thoughts; and yet there was a merry twinkle in those deep, shaded eyes that mystified old Bolly whenever he caught them fixed upon him.

Time passed on.

Supper done, they lit their pipes, and seeking easy positions, allowed their fire to go out, which it soon did for lack of fuel.

A strange silence had fallen upon the little party. Ralph and Joe were thinking of their mission of vengeance, Bolly indulged in dreams with his eyes half-closed, in which his dear chum, Pandey Ellis, figured prominently, and

the white-haired reprobate evidently planning how he could become possessed of Bolly's scalp. Suddenly the peace was broken.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FUGITIVES OF THE NORTH-WEST.

THE great Missouri river swept through the primeval forest, then across a stretch of prairie land, and entered among the hills.

Here an immense gap formed its bed, as if the mountains at some remote day in the dim past had been rent asunder to allow its passage. At this point, the view was grand and picturesque beyond description. From the top of the gorge an extended view might have been obtained of the rolling prairie land, and the black line low down on the horizon that indicated the forest.

The sun had just vanished in the far west. Brilliant lines seemed to traverse the sky, all radiating from the given center. Here and there, small banks of clouds that had, erstwhile, been but a modest white or dull gray, now assumed the glowing mantle of crimson, gold, or orange or lavender.

Such a scene would entrance the observer, if possessed of any love of the beautiful in nature.

Upon the sides of the hills, at a point not far from the summit, two forms stood gazing at the glory of the heavens.

They were a young man and a young woman; indeed, she seemed but a girl, so *petite* in point of size, and with such a fresh young face. She seemed, with her fair face and sweet blue eyes, the incarnation of all that was good and beautiful.

They watched the setting sun, and the painting of nature's cunning hand upon the flaming sky. Ever and anon, he turned and looked upon his companion. In these tender glances could be traced infinite love, mingled also with pity and sorrow; for, despite the interest she seemed to take in the picturesque scene, traces of sadness could be noticed upon that sweet, girlish face.

The heavenly landscape at length lost all interest for the young man, and his eyes were fixed upon the face of his companion.

No word was spoken, but she seemed to be conscious of his gaze: some subtle magnetism drew her eyes to his. She tried to smile up in his face; but the attempt was a failure, for the tears, restrained until now, ran down her cheeks like pearls.

His arm was around her in an instant, and the girl hid her wet face on his shoulder, while her emotion shook her little form.

"Dear Nellie, I can't tell you how sorry I am. It is all my fault. But for me, you would have been safe with your father at the fort. Oh! I could almost curse—"

"Hush, Harry," she said, placing a little hand over his mouth, which he kissed rapturously; "you are not to blame. I should have known better. But it was not that; I could never regret loving you." She said this with such a sweet blush that one could almost fancy that her cheeks had borrowed the tints of the setting sun.

"Then why those tears, my darling?" he asked, as he looked into the depths of those blue eyes, so full of tender love for him.

"My poor father, bereft of his only child. He never refused me a single favor in my life before," she said, with another sob.

"I, too, am very sorry for him. I loved him like a father, as he had me brought up like a son. You and I have loved each other long, Nellie; what, then, is this insurmountable barrier he speaks of, between us? I am of good parentage; he said that himself. I should have borne with him, but he insisted upon it that there was no hope for me in the future. Now I have come to regret this mad move on my part, but you know it was not my intention to come one-tenth this far. I merely wished to avoid pursuit by taking the only route that he would not suspect, but they got on our trail. Three times did I intend turning, but on each occasion I saw the smoke of their camp-fire. They have chased us here, and here let us turn at bay. They will tear my darling from me, but I will even submit to that, trusting in Heaven for a restoration in the future, rather than that you should suffer further, my Nellie;" and there was a mournful cadence in the young man's tones that told of his sorrow.

The shades of evening were drawing around them. Already the trees cast weird shadows upon the ground, which were being gradually enveloped in the dark mantle of the approaching night.

Noticing this, the young man proceeded to make his arrangements for the night. A little tent that had been packed upon the odd horse

they had with them was quickly set up. Then a fire was started, and Nellie commenced preparing their repast.

"It will be a slender meal, Harry, I warn you, for all of our things have run out, and we must eat fried venison alone," she said, with a return of humor twinkling in her eyes.

"Anything, so that it is prepared by these dainty hands, is far better to me than a feast in a king's palace," returned this ardent lover, kissing her hand.

Nellie laughed, and told him to reserve his decision until after the meal.

Theirs was a strange story. Nellie Hasly was the only child of the major who commanded the frontier fort and trading-post. Lieutenant Harry Belmont was his ward, having been given into the major's charge by a dear friend, on his death-bed.

The two young people had been together some years, and it was but natural that they should become deeply attached. So far all was well, but Harry soon began to entertain a feeling that was warmer than that of brotherly affection for the pretty child of his guardian.

When he broached the matter to the major, he turned as white as a ghost—said there was an insurmountable impediment in the way of their marrying—and seemed greatly shocked at some ideas the young man's question had aroused.

After this he had done all that he could to separate them, but love ever laughs at locksmiths, and obstacles are easily overcome by the enamored ones. Opposition has been the cause of many a wedding, when the engagement would have been broken off had all gone on uninterruptedly.

Lieutenant Belmont was sent off on an expedition, while Nellie was locked in her room. If the major, for mysterious reasons, wished the match broken off, he should have explained matters, partly at least. As it was, he took the very means to consummate the calamity he dreaded.

The major thought by this *coup de main* he had nipped the affair in the bud, but, like Samson, he himself was buried in the ruins of his little plan.

One day a courier came in with the news that Lieutenant Belmont had vanished from his camp, nor could they trace him anywhere. The major, with a growing fear in his breast, hastened to the room where Nellie had been confined.

It was empty.

Lieutenant Belmont had gone on another expedition. The trail was discovered, leading, as the unhappy father soon found, into the very hotbed of hostile Indians, the young soldier having taken this route because he felt that it would be the last place they would look for him, as indeed it would have been but for a scout's stumbling upon the trail made by the three horses, and his reporting the same at the fort.

This was the whole story.

They had followed on and on, unaware that their camp-fire was chasing the fugitives further, by far, than they had ever thought of going. Major Hasly's demeanor was terrible. He called down the curse of Heaven upon his own head if anything happened to the lovers, but he had a far different reason for remorse than any of the others suspected.

The supper was eaten almost in silence, for Harry had not the heart to laugh and joke when that look of sorrow rested so plainly upon the fair face of his companion.

Around them the grand trees arose like guardian sentinels. The ground was covered by a mossy carpet that felt like velvet to the feet. Not twenty yards away was the edge of the great abyss through which the king of muddy waters rolled. His mutterings and growlings could be heard from where they sat.

Darkness had enveloped the landscape in its black mantle, and each distinct feature soon lost its individuality in the general gloom.

The fugitive lovers still sat by their fire, occasionally speaking, but for the most part keeping silence. To the lieutenant, the past presented but little that was pleasant food for thought. He had looked to a bright future when his love for sweet Nellie Hasly was returned, but now because of the determined opposition of her father, this expectation had turned to Dead Sea fruit, so far as he himself was concerned, for he was compelled to look upon the sorrow and pain which Nellie tried so bravely to hide.

And yet, the brunt of the blame must rest with the major. In the first place, if the obstacle he spoke of really stood between them, why had he not kept a close eye upon them, for

it was so natural for two young people to fall in love. Then again it had been the intention of the fugitives to go only a short distance into the North-west, and then, by taking a roundabout route reach some border settlement, where they were not known, and where the marriage could be consummated.

The lieutenant had fully made up his mind to be chased no further. They would remain on this spot until the irate major came up, and surrender to his clemency.

Unfortunately, the decision came one day too late.

Harry was looking upon Nellie as she sat with her head unconsciously bowed, when a guttural exclamation caused him to leap to his feet with a great fear in his heart.

A dozen Indians stood within a few feet of him. In their leader he recognized the far-famed chief Buffalo Horn, who must have seen whom he had for prisoners.

"Ugh! white soldier! major's daughter! big ransom! much whisky for red-man! Ugh!" They were captives, and all was lost.

CHAPTER V.

THE PHANTOM PROCESSION.

"Hist!"

It was the mysterious, white-haired Old Hickory who gave utterance to this exclamation in a shrill whisper.

The fire had been suffered to die out completely, and the darkness fell around them so densely that their positions were only marked by the separate glow of each ranger's pipe.

Every man instinctively put his hand over the bowl of this silent companion, thus hiding his location.

The rustling of bushes could be heard not far away, and it was evident that something was approaching. Bolly Wherrit put out his hand and drew his trusty rifle to him. In all probability every one of the others did the same thing.

One of the banks that formed the ravine in which their camp had been pitched was devoid of bushes and trees on the top at a certain point directly above them, while the other was covered by a dense growth of bush and vine.

Toward this first point attention was now directed, as the sounds seemed to be approaching the open spot.

Here for perhaps a distance of twenty feet the brow of the little ridge was outlined against the blue, star-bedecked dome of heaven, in a sharp, clear-cut line.

The four rangers crouching at the bottom of this ravine, saw a dark form glide into view, and commence to cross this open space. Plainly outlined against the heavens, there could be no mistaking that form with its long braided hair.

It was an Indian.

Another and another followed, until a procession seemed to be passing before the eyes of the rangers. Bolly Wherrit was counting; them with the precision of a Yankee school-master.

At last the end came, the last shadowy figure with its flowing black hair had vanished among the dense bushes that bounded the open spot, and the sound of swinging bushes and rustling leaves died away altogether.

"Twenty-one," announced Bolly.

"Ramrods an' rifles! gather me up in a chip-basket, an' roast me over an iceberg," exclaimed Roaring Ralph Rockwood.

"Silence! thar's more o' 'em," declared the strange Old Hickory, who seemed to possess the ears of a weasel.

All eyes were once more turned upon the top of the bank.

Another Indian form glided into view, followed by several more. This group quickly vanished in the same direction taken by their predecessors.

"Seven an' a squaw," announced Bolly.

"Correct az ter number, ole hoss, but I'll take my affidavit that warn't no squaw. I seen flowin' dress, an' two on 'em seemed to hev hold o' her arms," said Old Hickory, with a punch at Bolly's ribs, which might have been resented by that individual at any other time, but which he only granted at now.

"Grunters an' grub-grinders! kin sech things be in these here degenerate days? Chaw my breeches for soup now, that's jest awful. I don't care a cent who hears me; it's this child what says it, Roarin' Ralph Sedunk Rockwood, you bet."

"Then, ag'in, I see'd sumpin' more," pursued Old Hickory, in his croaking voice; "in thet fust wampus thar war a prisoner also—a white man."

"Thunder! ye must hev ther eyes o' a cat, Mebbe ye kin tell us what he looked like," growled Bolly.

Old Hickory chuckled aloud:

"Eyes! was it thet ye remarked? Wal now, kemrade, ther hain't much ye kin hide from me in the dark. My peepers air small, but they hev ther pierce o' ther majestic eagle what soars above ther loftiest mounting, az ther—az ther—I mean az my ole gran'ther used to remark. Now, ter show ye a remarkable instance o' w'at I say, thar's a scar, Bolly Wherrit, runnin' from yer forehead down jest in front o' yer left ear."

"Jest so," said Bolly, quietly, and yet wondering how the keen-eyed old reprobate saw this almost indistinct mark, while he said nothing about the long mark across the ranger's face that had only been received a couple of months before.

Roaring Ralph must needs put in his word at this juncture:

"Cover me wid a sand-hill; I'm goin' ter snooze. Air ye goin' ter stand thar all night, talkin' w'en ye might be sleepin' the sleep o' the just?"

"Right ye air, ole man. Woo ther gentle goddess o' sweet slumber it is. I'm jest death on a snooze, an' no mistake," and, as he spoke, Old Hickory threw himself upon the ground close to Roaring Ralph.

The other two stood talking for a few minutes, but were, at length, prone to follow the example of the would-be sleepers, especially when Roaring Ralph gave vent to a sleepy growl.

So Bolly and Rocky Mountain Joe left the subject of the Indian captives for further discussion in the morning, and, following the example of Ralph, threw themselves upon the ground.

The night passed slowly on.

After several hours of uninterrupted darkness, the eastern sky lighted up, and presently the moon arose, silencing every object, inanimate and otherwise, with her rays.

But our friends, lying in the deep ravine, were beyond their reach. The trees that hung over them shaded the rangers well, so that only an occasional slender arrow of silvery light crept slowly over them.

From her position in the heavens the moon saw many strange sights on this night, and not the least singular of these was the shadowy figure that, with many a chuckle, crept away from the camp in the ravine with the noiseless powers of a phantom.

Bolly Wherrit, Rocky Joe, and Roaring Ralph were all old campaigners, whose ears might be likened to those of a weasel or lynx, and yet they were not awakened by any movement beside them.

Roaring Ralph was aroused by a vigorous shake. Looking up, he discovered that it was daybreak, and the angular face of Bolly Wherrit looked down into his own.

"What's the matter? What's up, Bolly?" he exclaimed.

"Wal, it's a blessin' we're alive this hyar minit, instead o' bein' crows' meat. Whar's that lovin' chum o' yours this beyutiful mornin'?" demanded Bolly, severely.

"What on earth d'ye mean?" and Ralph jumped up.

"Ole Hickory's vamped ther ranch. Feel under yer hat an' see ef yer sculp's thar. Hyar's ther paper he lit his pipe with, an' it's wun o' them proclamations about my chum. My 'pinion is, Ole Hickory war a humbug; he's an agent o' ther reds, p'raps Dusky Joe himself. He's probably a-puttin' up these hyar notices himself. Reckon he jest dropped inter our camp ter find out whether Pandey war along, so he c'd git his sculp. Hang me, Rally, that ole rooster war the biggest humbug on the border!"

Roaring Ralph seemed demoralized. "Tain't safe ter rile me that way. I'm a rearin', tearin' thunderbolt from the Colorado canyon, what won't be imposed upon. No man can sit down on me an' live. Ole Hickory, I'm goin' ter git even wi' ye yet."

"Even so," remarked Bolly, coolly, for he was now recovering his usually unruffled disposition, "an' now we'll drop that subject, scare up some breakfast, an' then start on the trail ag'in, tho' I spect it'll bring up in ther willage o' Buffler Horn, whar I kin hang up this hyar proclamation. Thar's work fur us thar, seelin' 'bout them captives, an' gettin' hands on the villain what keeled poor Tom Grampus over. Then I might find out whether any critter means ter aim that reward they offered fur ole Pandey's sculp, 'cause if thar is, I jest want ter git my hands on the throat o' the pizen critter."

"All right, Bolly; I'm thar, Roarin' Ralph, you bet. Now for grub."

The little fire was speedily rekindled and some choice portions of venison cooking for the hungry trio. When these were done to a turn, they speedily vanished.

Then preparations were in order for a start. These were few and simple, and in a very short time the three rangers had reached the spot where Rocky Joe had left a mark to tell them the position of the trail of Tom Grampus's murderer.

Then the same old tramp was taken up, with Joe in the lead and Roaring Ralph bringing up the rear, while Bolly marched on between them, his eyes keeping strict watch, but his thoughts wandering back to that prince of humbugs—Old Hickory.

CHAPTER VI.

ROARING RALPH'S FEARFUL NEWS.

The night breeze caught up a low bubbling cry of anguish, that seemed choked in the utterance, and then all became as silent as before.

Buffalo Horn's village, composed of several hundred lodges, had been pitched in the great forest bordering the muddy Missouri, and from this point the renowned chieftain, in defiance of the treaty with the government, by which his people were fed during the winter months, sallied forth to murder any unfortunate tourists or settlers who came under his observation.

The village lay close upon the bank of the river, whose murmuring and gurgling sounded a monotonous refrain to the ears of the warriors. From the high hills on the opposite bank, and mellowed by distance, came the scream of a savage panther, the long-drawn howls of great mountain wolves, and the scream of the wild-cat. It was also the haunt of the ferocious grizzly bear, whose broad tracks could be met with occasionally among the hills.

The strange sound we have heard, came from the deep fringe of grass upon the bank, between the lodges and the swiftly-moving water, and which nodded and swayed in the cool night wind.

Presently a head, a white man's head, was cautiously raised above the grass, and an earnest survey taken of the village. Then it vanished from view, and once more silence fell upon the border of the stream.

Some twenty minutes later the form of an Indian brave stalked into the village, which, with the exception of a single point, where a fire burned brightly, was wrapped in complete darkness.

Half a dozen chiefs were clustered around this blaze, engaged in an earnest discussion, for the sound of their guttural voices could be heard at times raised in excited debate.

The Indian whom we have seen enter the village from the direction of the river, crawled cautiously up to a point as near the fire as possible, and lying upon the ground as if drunk or asleep, he kept edging still closer.

What Roaring Ralph Rockwood heard during the next half-hour opened his eyes considerably, and from the queer expressions he muttered to himself under his breath, it might be surmised that the news was of far greater magnitude than he had expected to glean.

A faint glow began to appear in the eastern sky; the moon was about to wheel into view, and Roaring Ralph thought it was time he made himself scarce in that neighborhood, unless he particularly desired to reveal the weakness of his Indian disguise.

Gradually edging away from the vicinity of the camp-fire, he placed a lodge between it and himself. Then rising to his feet, he stalked boldly toward the river-bank, where he stood for a few minutes, as if contemplating the flowing water, on which the first rays of the rising moon now fell. The supposed Sioux brave stood a moment—then was gone. He had jumped down the river-bank, which at this point was some six feet in height, and was gliding along the water's margin, going up the stream.

In about ten minutes he came to a halt, fumbling in the bundle of clothes he carried, for something.

"Mustangs an' Mexicans! reckon I'd better let the boys know who's coming, or some of 'em might put a knife atween my shoulders. Now for it."

Raising a whistle to his mouth, he blew several short, sweet notes, such as one could easily imagine as coming from some strange night bird, calling to his mate.

From up the stream the signal was answered,

and when this reached his ears, the disguised ranger moved forward with confidence, knowing that all was right.

Dark figures crouched under the forest trees, looking in the gloom that surrounded them, like so many phantoms. As the adventurer drew near, a voice questioned:

"That you, Bolly?"

"It's me, Roarin' Ralph Rockwood, you bet. Why, whar's Bolly gone?"

"Took a notion to go into the place himself and fasten that proclamation he carried to the lodge of Buffalo Horn," came in Rocky Joe's tones.

And these three other forms! Surely we have met two of them before, and can recognize Blue Beans, and his Indian friend Powder Flash. The latter was still munching away at a piece of that tough venison, as though he meant to put his words about eating the whole of that old buck himself, into execution.

The third one of the new arrivals was as manly and handsome a specimen of a young hunter as ever tramped the western prairies, and although Jack Holmes possessed but little of this world's goods, it was the boast of his manhood to say that he had never willfully harmed an innocent person, nor had the helpless ever appealed to him for aid without being answered.

Along the borders Jack Holmes was known as a fearless ranger, ever ready to assist in the right, and quite as handy with his weapons as his tongue.

He had come across Blue Beans and the Comanche chieftain shortly after their chase with the hostile Indians, and being an old friend, had naturally joined forces with them. The two comrades were wandering around like the famous Quixote, in search of adventures, and in this part of the country they were likely to meet with all their heart desired.

Their meeting with our three old ranger friends had come very close to a tragedy, for catching a fleeting glimpse of each other as they "treed," each had mistaken the opposite party for Indians, and several hats were bored with bullets before the truth was made manifest.

United they made quite a strong party, and when the three new additions were shown the placard posted up by the Sioux chieftains, a shade of anxiety passed over the features of handsome Jack Holmes.

"Down at Laramie, boys, there was a rumor that the old man had gone under, and that his gray scalp was on its way to the village of Buffalo Horn for redemption. I tried to trace it but couldn't get any further than that a half-breed had seen the scalp in the possession of the man that killed old Pandey," Jack had said.

Bolly Wherrit had refused to believe it, but nevertheless had been much excited over such a thought. Pandey Ellis dead! his chum Pandey, in whose company he had tramped the plains for more than a score of years! Impossible, and yet, while showing such a bold front, Bolly grieved in secret.

"Well, what did you find out, old boss! I see by your dress that ye've been in the thick of 'em, I reckon ye've heard something," said Rocky Joe.

"Heard sumpin'! Wal, now, I reckon I've heard enough to make your hair stand on end, Rocky Joe. The infernal critter; how I'd like ter choke the life out o' him! If Bolly war only here now, he'd go clean crazy. Sculps an' sa-sages! but it's true, arter all," and the reckless ranger gave an actual groan.

The others were now alarmed.

"Ralph Rockwood, what does this mean! Do ye think we're a pack of babies that can't be trusted, can't hear some news without fainting dead away? Out with it, man! Is the world coming to an end? Has the old chief, Buffalo Horn, got a fish-bone in his throat, or did his whisky bottle break instead of his squaw's skull, the last time?"

"Hush, Joey! this here is serious. I pity poor Bolly Wherrit when he hears the news," Roaring Ralph responded, solemnly.

Rocky Joe's impatience was rapidly getting beyond all bounds.

"Roaring Ralph Sedunk Rockwood, if you don't hurry up and tell us what's the matter, there'll be a dead man among those trees in less than five minutes. Who were those prisoners, and what's what?"

"Easy now, Joey, old friend. Them prisoners I didn't find out much about, except that the young fellow was an army officer. I crept up to half a dozen chiefs what were havin' a confab, an' heard everything. Buffer Horn had just received word through one o' his braves that a man, with the sculp of Pandey

Ellis in his possession, war on the way thar, an' would arrive soon, expectin' the reward."

An exclamation of horror went around.

"Poor old Pandey!" said Rocky Joe.

"And poor Bolly Wherrit," added Blue Beans. "Won't he be tearin' around, though! I sh'd hate ter be in the shoes o' ther critter w'at hez that gray sculp in his possession."

"Who was it, Rally?" asked Joe.

"That air the wust o' it. Trowers and tom-cats! arter he hed laid alongside o' we uns fur a night. Tie me up in a blanket, ter think that he had poor Pandey's sculp in that leetle sachel at his side."

"What! you don't mean Old Hickory?" exclaimed Rocky Joe.

"Dust my Sunday breeches if I don't now," half howled the old prairie ranger; "yes, that identical ole villain w'at slept w' us, an' who wanted to become my chum. Oh! wouldn't I give sumpin to lay hands on him this blessed minit! Bolly Wherrit will tear his insides out ef this air true, an' thar hain't any doubt but w'at it is true. Yes, sir, I lay tharan! listened to them reds a gloryin' over it, an' decidin' ter pay the reward when the ole critter kim in with the sculp, as it might hev a good effect in any future transaction. Thar's no mistake about it; poor ole Pandey Ellis has kicked the bucket an' gone up Salt river."

A silence fell upon the little party. It was as if their feelings would not permit of a further interchange of opinions on the subject. It was Rocky Joe who broke in with:

"Hark! there's poor Bolly."

A peculiarly mournful howl came floating from the direction of the Indian village, and all of them recognized it as Bolly's private signal to tell of his presence. They stood, almost trembling, for Bolly's anger would be frightful when he learned of his chum's death.

Then footsteps and the sound of low words reached their ears; Bolly was not returning alone. Had he rescued the soldier prisoner of the Sioux, or— Good heavens! there could be no mistaking that croaking voice. The two now loomed up in the darkness, and Roaring Ralph forgot to give utterance to any queer remark, for Bolly's companion was the scalp-taker, Old Hickory.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRINCE OF PRAIRIE RANGERS.

THE rangers were thunderstruck at this example of temerity and boldness. What did this coming of the treacherous old man portend! Did he covet their scalps also?

Roaring Ralph asked himself these questions, but was unable to utter a word aloud. And while they stood thus dumbfounded, Bolly and his companion reached their side.

"Wal, boyees, hyar we air, an' our ole friend along w' me. I met him jest az he war enterin' the Injin camp, an' coaxed him ter come w' me, fur I knowed that Rally thar war jest dyin' ter see his new chum ag'in. Ain't that kerrect, Hickory?" and Bolly turned to the white-bearded old sinner, who seemed to have come with evident reluctance.

"I reckon it air if ye say so, Bolly Wherrit," he croaked, dismally.

"Now then, boyees, shall we stay hyar wile I tell'ee w'at I did, an' saw, or move on a bit further?" asked Bolly.

"Move on," said Rocky Joe, sternly.

"Move on. I hev sumpin to tell ye, Bolly, what'll make ye take a fit," came from Roaring Ralph.

They commenced moving through the forest, going further away from the Indian village all the while. The reckless ranger kept close beside Old Hickory, whom he watched with a wary eye, fearful lest he should again give them escape.

The old man was shaking every little while, whether with fear or suppressed laughter none could say. Roaring Ralph thought it was the latter.

"He believes he's playing a good joke on us rangers, but I'll soon open his eyes to the truth; it's me that says it, Roarin' Ralph Rockwood, you bet," muttered he to himself.

In this manner something like half a mile was passed over. Rocky Joe, who led the little band, at length came to a halt, indicating that they had gone far enough.

It was an open space where they now stood, and the moon's rays (for she had been rising when Roaring Ralph left the Indian village, and was now in full sight), finding an entrance through interstices among the branches, lit up each individual form.

"Now," said Bolly, impatiently, "what is it ye hev ter tell me, Rally?"

"I reckon yer news'll keep a little, seein' az how we kin guess part an' know the rest. Bolly, prepare yerself for a shock. The ole man has gone under at last."

Bolly's face turned white.

"Pandy Ellis dead! Air ye humbuggin' me, Rally?" he exclaimed, almost piously.

"No humbug, ole hoss! I pity ye too much for that. Yas, Pandy war murdered. It war all on account o' that proclamation. His sculp air now on its way ter the Indian town, an' ther feller expects ter git the reward."

Bolly's face was now stern and hard.

"Rally, ye know more o' this than ye've told. Who air the critter? Tell me, an' az ther air a heaven above, I'll hev his heart's blood."

"Quiet now, Bolly. Thar stands the man who hez Pandy Ellis's sculp wif him!" and, turning suddenly, Roaring Ralph presented a revolver full at the head of Old Hickory.

Beyond a slight start that individual did not seem interested, but could they have seen the smile upon his face they would have wondered greatly.

Bolly's features were working strongly.

"How d'ye know this, Rally? Give me good proof before I murder the wretch," he said.

"Thar's proof as strong as Holy Writ, I reckon. S'arch that leetle bag at his side, an' ef ye don't find w'at ye look fur, then I'll eat my moccasins. Don't dare to stir a hand or foot, ye ugly hound!" and the ranger moved the heavy revolver closer to the head of the old white-beard.

Bolly Wherrit had sprung forward and torn the little bag that the old pretender carried at his side from its fastenings. To this Old Hickory made no objections; indeed, such a course would have been very dangerous with the weapon of Roaring Ralph within a few inches of his nose. His eyes seemed to follow the little sachel longingly, however.

Tearing it open, the excited Bolly Wherrit plunged his hand in. Then a choking cry burst from the lips of the veteran ranger, and the others could see his form tremble with keen emotion. Old Hickory moved uneasily, but the reckless ranger kept his revolver aimed with a steady hand, so that for him to have attempted escape would have proved a speedy death-summons.

After this momentary hesitation, Bolly drew out his hand and held aloft an object which one and all could distinguish in the moonlight that crept in between the trees.

It was a gray scalp.

The silence of death seemed to have fallen upon the little party, and for almost a full minute they stood without moving a hand or foot. It was as if some wizard had cast a spell over them, under the influence of which all their powers were useless.

Bolly Wherrit, the most sorely-stricken of the lot, was the first to recover. Holding the gray scalp firmly clutched in his rigid hand, he turned slowly upon the man who had carried it with him.

"Hound," said he, "is this hyar the sculp o' Pandy Ellis?"

"Don't know who yer 'dressin' by thet sweet name, but a rose by any other name w'u'd smell az sweet az ther—az I mean my ole gran'ther used ter remark. He war a wonderful ole man, he war. Why, gentlemen, I've seen ther time w'en that ole—"

"Does this sculp belong ter Pandy Ellis?" thundered the impassioned Bolly.

"Now, don't take on so. Az ter ther sculp, I reckon it did belong ter thet ole rooster once't, but it seems ter be yours now, for possession air nine-tenths o' ther law, az my ole gran—"

"Boys," and Bolly turned to the others, "Pandy Ellis hez gone under. Now w'at hed we better do wif this coyote?"

"Leave him to you, Bolly," answered Rocky Joe, and the rest nodded acquiescence.

"Then ter me belongs the duty o' avengin' Pandy Ellis's death. Now, ye ole reprobate an' sculp-monger, look me in ther face. What become o' my chum's body?"

Old Hickory chuckled.

"Thar ain't a livin' soul 'cept myself in ther whole world w'at c'u'd answer thet. He might ask ther night winds but they c'u'dn't tell. Ther rocks hev ears, but no more c'u'd they speak. Air thet enuff?" he said, in his croaking tones.

"Boyees, the critter acknowledges it. Arter thet I see no need o' tryin' him as he hez condemned himself. Coyote, ye hev jest two minits ter live. Dare ter raise a hand, or so much az wink yer eye, an' I'll plunge this blade inter yer black heart afore the time air up. Now make the most o' yer time."

There was a cold ring in the ranger's voice.

With that gray scalp in one hand, and his gleaming bowie in the other, he stood before the doomed man like an avenging Nemesis, his hair, sanded by the hand of time, blowing about his shoulders when a breath of the night wind came sailing over the open space.

The others expected Old Hickory to beg for his life, or at least show some signs of fear, but to their surprise he did neither. Indeed, one could almost believe he laughed at this stern, Roman-like attitude of Bolly Wherrit's. Was this bravado, or something else?

"Now, see hyar, ole hoss, I'd like ter bet ye ten ter wun thet I live ter kerry ther sculp ye hold, inter ther village o' ther reds, an' unless they prove treacherous, git ther reward fur it. Take me up?"

There was no reply to this insulting proposal; Bolly was counting to himself while his keen eyes kept watch on the murderer.

"Wal, hang me ef I kin offer ye any better odds. Self-preservation air ther fust law o' nature, az—az my gran'ther used ter remark. Now, seein' az you fellers seem ter be in need o' sum new clothes, I tell ye w'at I'll do. Be a sorter guard ter me in ther Injin village an' I'll divy wif ye, guv ye a buffler-robe, a fox-skin, two beaver-pelts each, an' wind it up wif a horn o' whisky. Cum, w'at d'ye say, Mister Wherrit?"

Bolly's only answer was:

"One minit gone!"

"Wal, bu'st my moccasins ef thet don't beat ther Dutch! I believe ther critters actually want harf ther reward, an' thet ain't fair, arter I hed ter git ther sculp. Now, see hyar, I'm gittin' riled. If ye don't want help a feller—"

"Time's up! Look yer last on ther blue sky, coyote, fur I'm goin' ter kill ye," said Bolly, drawing back his arm to strike.

The old fellow gave a laugh, and then seemed to spit out some object he had held in his mouth. When he spoke again no man on earth would have imagined it the same person.

"Thar's many a slip atween ther cup an' ther lip, az ther feller sez. Bolly Wherrit, ye're growin' old; whar air yer eyes? Ther ole man hez pulled ther wool over 'em! Bu'st my moccasins ef this ain't worth livin' fur. War goin' fur ter slew his own chum. He! he! he!"

Consternation! Old Hickory no longer, but the prince of prairie rangers himself—Pandy Ellis!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BIGGEST HUMBUG ON RECORD.

FOR almost a full minute not one of those men moved hand or foot, but stood there like so many statues, glued to the ground with the different emotions that overpowered them.

Had a bolt of lightning suddenly descended from the clear heavens, or any other equally unlikely event occurred, they could not have been more dumbfounded.

As for Bolly Wherrit, he was knocked "all in a heap," as he afterward expressed his feelings. To think that he had been about to kill his chum to avenge his own murder! The idea was too bewildering for him to realize all at once; he was dazed. He stood there, with one foot raised, and the knife held above his head. It was as if some malignant fairy had lifted her magic wand, and enchanted them as they stood.

Powder Flash, being the least interested of the party, was the first to break the spell. Bolly dropped the gray scalp when he made that step toward the supposed Old Hickory, and the chief had pounced upon it eagerly, and had been intently examining it, ever since. Just now he made the discovery of a fact that Bolly in his anger had not noticed.

"Hooh! scalp more'n six month old. Seen Heavy Knife three moons back. Dis big humbug scalp!" said he.

That started old Pandy.

"Bolly," said he, with a vein of tenderness in his voice, "ain't ye got no welcome fur me, ole chum?"

Another moment and Bolly Wherrit's arms were around his neck. They were life-long friends and comrades, and after the late scare the former had received, his emotion could well be pardoned.

Roaring Ralph was perhaps the most thoroughly astonished man of the group, for he had overheard the confab of the chiefs, and had made up his mind upon the subject, and when once his view was taken, an earthquake was needed to shake his opinion.

"I'm a rearin', tearin' thunderbolt from the Colorado canyon, but bu'st my buttons if I ever seen the ekal of thet afore. The ole reptile wid the sculp, thet I looked on as a most unmitiga-

ted scoundrel, and thet I sh'u'd be ashamed ter own the rope thet hung him, to turn out to be Pandy Ellis, the prince of rangers! Tar an' feather me, an' h'ist me inter a 'Fache's grave; I own up dead beat. Ole kimrade, guv us yer paw. I hope ye won't cherish any ill feelings fur w'at we sed."

Old Pandy chuckled aloud as he grasped the hand extended to him.

"Not a whit, Rally, I've got ther joke on ther lot o' ye, an' kin 'ford ter be generous. Blue blazes! I've fooled ther reds a leetle during my lifetime, but I never expected ter pull ther wool over Bolly's eyes thar, by ther aid o' a hickory nut in my cheek, a new suit o' buckskin, an' lettin' my ha'r grow long all over my face. Cum, boyees, I'm nearly shoooken ter pieces wif laughter. Squat hyar—we won't want do any work for an hour or more—an' Pandy 'll tell ye w'at under ther heavings this mystery air about. He's in wif ye hand an' glove ter avenge pore Tom Grampus, but ye must be nigh about bu'stin' wif curiosity, so I'll show marcy an' explainify."

They hastily followed his example—all but Powder Flash, who preferred leaning against a tree, and chewing energetically at the large piece of tough venison, although he listened to what Pandy was saying.

The old ranger had cached his ancient but dearly beloved rifle and revolvers, while he tried the beautiful new weapons he had sent as a present to him from a young friend and admirer in the East. This was just after Bolly and Rocky Joe had started for New York on a six months' trip.

In the start Pandy had made a resolve not to apply a razor or a pair of "snippers" as he called them to his face or head all the time, just to see how he would look when Bolly came back, so that the old man bore a six months' crop, although he did not seem to like it a bit.

When he returned from his hunting tour, highly delighted with his new-fangled weapons, he found his cache empty; his old rifle was gone. Now there were many dear associations connected with Betsy Jane, and Pandy swore a round oath to recover the old *souvenir* if it took him a year.

He soon got on the track; a Sioux brave had robbed the cache, one named Spotted Coyote. This was enough for Pandy. Just as he was about to start out alone to demand its return, he came across one of those "proclamations" which he read and thrust into his pocket.

A plan came into his head, which for reckless daring it would have been exceedingly hard to have excelled. He set about carrying it out immediately. An entire new suit of buckskin was purchased, a few alterations made in his general appearance, some little practice gone through with in regard to his articulation, with a hickory-nut in his cheek that gave him the most wonderful voice on record, and then Pandy was ready.

The old prairie ranger had obtained a gray scalp that looked very much like his own when his hair was shorter, and with this trophy secure in his little sachel, he started out on the wildest mission imaginable.

He actually intended entering the village of Buffalo Horn, trusting to his disguise to keep his identity a secret, and, sailing under the name of Old Hickory, present the gray scalp as the one advertised for.

Whether it would be redeemed or not the trapper chief could not say. Roaring Ralph then told what he had overheard the Indians discussing, which seemed to tickle the old ranger, for he laughed aloud.

"We'll git 'em all yet, boyees, by ther livin' jingo. Ef we kin play this hyar trick on ther reds, they'll keep quiet hereafter. Jest fancy ther pelts an' powder, ther keg o' whisky, w'ich I won't touch fur wun, an' ther silver-mounted rifle. Mebbe they'll lend me ponies ter kerry 'em off. Chaw my moccasins but it would be a glorious trick!"

Then Pandy went on to relate how he had overheard the conversation of the three death-trailers. The shadowy form close by them, of which mention has been made before, was none other than that of the old prairie ranger, who had crept close to the three men in order to hear what they said.

He at once resolved to puzzle Bolly Wherrit, and after making a few more changes in his dress, he presented himself at their camp. What his success was, the reader already knows.

Several times the queer old ranger came very near proclaiming his identity by making use of his strange expression, "as the fellow says," but luckily for the success of his plan he succeeded on each occasion in laying the remark

upon the head of his "old gran'ther,"—a personage quite unknown to Bolly.

The joke had been such a success that there was little doubt as to how it would work upon the Indians, although, but for the news Roaring Ralph brought in, the rangers would have considered it rather doubtful if the payment for the gray scalp would be made.

Bolly Wherrit had recovered from his dazed state, and was so infinitely pleased to have his old chum along, that he readily forgave Pandey's practical joke, and beamed on him like a lover.

Rocky Joe now reminded him that as yet they had not heard how he got on in the town of the red-men, so Bolly proceeded to enlighten his friends in that respect.

The proclamation that we saw him take from the tree in the forest and place in his pocket with the avowed determination of fastening it to the lodge of the head chief of the Sioux town, he had carried along with him.

It was a much more dangerous task for Bolly to prowl about the village than for the reckless Colorado ranger, seeing that he was not disguised in the least, but by a great exercise of caution, he succeeded in avoiding all prowling Indians.

To an experienced ranger, one who had fought and hunted with the Indians for forty years, it was an easy task to pick out the lodge of the chief, Buffalo Horn, by means of the roughly drawn and colored pictures that adorned it. Having made sure of this, Bolly proceeded to fasten the proclamation to it in such a manner that the moon's rays would fall full upon it when that luminary arose above the tree-tops.

The next thing the ranger accomplished was to find out who the captives were, and where they were imprisoned. This he managed to discover, although he did not enter into particulars regarding his method of finding out the facts.

"Thar hain't wun among ye, boyees, c'u'd guess who they air. Pandey, d'ye remember that time w'en you an' me war chased by nigh on a thousand o' these Sioux, an' how our hosses nigh fell under us?"

"Bet yer boots I do," answered Pandey.

"Wal, that young major, Hal Belmont, air ther man prisoner. Ther ain't the wust o' it. They've got the commander's darter thar."

"Leetle May Hasly!" ejaculated the old trapper chief, in surprise.

"Eggsactly. How they ever kim in sich a flix I hain't got the least idee, but the plain fact stares us in the face—thar they air. Probably the young folks war out ridin', and the reds gobbled 'em up. Must 'a' been prisoners a long while then, fur this hyar air a long way from ther post."

May Hasly! How the sweet name thrilled the heart of one member of the little company! Fortunately, Jack Holmes's hat screened his face, and none of them saw the flush that dyed it crimson. He had loved the young girl, but, seeing her preference for Harry Belmont, had gone away so that he might never look on her face again, well knowing that absence was the only thing likely to bring forgetfulness. And now May Hasly was a prisoner among the savage Sioux! Every noble impulse that slumbered in the young man's heart leaped into life. He would help to save them both and then go away again, plunging into the dangers of the wilderness, so that he might not be a witness of their happiness.

Coming events do not always cast a shadow before, and Jack knew not what was in store for him.

CHAPTER IX.

BORDER FIRE-BRANDS.

MIDNIGHT had come and gone.

The moon had wheeled high up in the heavens, and every object upon which her rays fell seemed transformed into pure silver. Innumerable stars dotted the blue dome of heaven, winking and twinkling as if communicating the secrets of the heavenly spheres.

A silence had fallen upon the Indian town, which was unbroken save by the bark of some cur who took an intense delight in howling at the mistress of the night as she sailed across the sky.

In the dense forest, and among the distant hills, the usual nocturnal chorus that is always found in the wilderness held forth in all its charming diversity. The howls of scores of wolves were supplemented by the hyena-like laugh of the coyote, and this delightful melody was occasionally rendered more inspiring by the shrill scream of the mountain panther, prowling about in search of food and plunder.

Through the woods, at this witching hour,

specter-like forms were noiselessly making their way. Occasionally they would pass some spot where the moonbeams fell upon the ground; then it was apparent that, while two of the party appeared to be Indians, the remainder evidently were prairie rangers.

At length the slumbering Indian town lay before them, with the soft moonlight shining on the many lodges and cabins.

Here the midnight prowlers came to a halt, and an earnest consultation appeared to be going on among them. Then they separated, going off in three different directions, and with the understanding that they were to meet at this point again when the work they set out to do was accomplished.

Pandey Ellis was the only one left. He intended entering the Indian town in search of his old weapons, stolen from the *cache* by the Sioux brave, Spotted Coyote.

Each of the three parties had its mission. Bolly and Jack Holmes were to rescue the prisoners after Blue Beans and his dusky friend, Powder Flash had set fire to the grass at the northern end of the town, where the lodges and old huts were packed pretty closely together, and would burn like tinder.

During the confusion that this threatening fire would cause, Roaring Ralph and Rocky Joe were to steal a lot of horses from the *corral* at the southern end of the town upon which they could make their escape, intending to return in a few days and hunt down the murderer of Tom Grampus.

It was a splendid arrangement, and providing all went well, they would be able to laugh at the Indians.

As Pandey Ellis was going in on his own account, so to speak, we will follow him first, and see how he fared.

After seeing his comrades well off, the prairie prince himself glided toward the Indian village. It was not over twenty yards from the border of the forest on this side, and the space between was filled with long grass that nodded in the gentle night breeze. There was little or no difficulty to such a veteran ranger in approaching the wigwam town under these circumstances, seeing that he had no guards to hood-wink, and the grass afforded excellent shelter.

Before five minutes had passed, he was among the lodges.

During the afternoon, Pandey had scouted near the town, and discovered many things that might have escaped eyes less keen than his. Among other things he had noted the position of the *corral*, the lodge which the warrior who had stolen his weapons from the *cache* called his own, and, in a general way, was able to give information even to Bolly and Roaring Ralph who had been inside the precincts that very night.

He made his way directly to the lodge over which Spotted Coyote reigned. Indeed, he reigned alone, for it had no occupant, saving himself. Spotted Coyote had once possessed a squaw who labored under the high-sounding name of Moccasineh—who had perished of too much whisky. After which, Spotted Coyote had lived alone. He could now get drunk whenever he pleased, or rather, when the stock of liquor permitted the luxury of a "drunk," without a tongue-lashing and perhaps other punishment.

When Pandey Ellis came crawling so stealthily into the lodge, the warrior was far gone in a drunken stupor. Pandey quickly realized this fact, judging by the smell of whisky, and the Indian's heavy breathing.

He was a trifle disappointed, for he could not kill a drunken Indian, but he took out his knife and made a slit in the fellow's greasy hunting-shirt, just above the heart, which would tell him how near death he had been, when he once more regained his senses.

From the belt of the drunken Sioux, Pandey took his old revolver, and lying close by was the long rifle that had served him so faithfully for many long years. He laid hold upon these weapons eagerly, and then he made his way to the open air; then, as he turned his eyes toward the north, he could see a faint light, that became brighter with each second. By this, he knew that Blue Beans and his Indian friend had fired the half-dried grass beyond the village, and probably a lodge or two, in addition.

Presently bright flames sprung into view above the outer lodges; and quickly a frightened yell was heard; an Indian brave dashed through the town, his greasy garments on fire, his lodge having been the first to flash up and disappear before the devouring element.

The scene that ensued was a perfect Pandemonium. Warriors, chiefs, squaws and pap-

pooses, aroused from their slumber by the rapidly-increasing shouts, ran here, there and everywhere, lending the aid of their voices to increase the racket. The chiefs gathered some of the men, and set to work fighting the element that threatened their homes.

Pandey had not been idle, but after that first sweeping glance he had hastened to decamp. As he hurried across the little stretch of level land that lay between himself and the rendezvous, the keen ears of the prairie prince caught the sound of horses snorting and moving toward the south, and from this he judged that Bolly and Roaring Ralph were at their work.

How the others would succeed he could not even guess, but, much depended upon them.

When Pandey reached the rendezvous, there was no one at hand. The *furor* in the village grew more deafening with each passing sound. Then the sound of hoofstrokes broke on his ears, and, by the aid of the rapidly-increasing light at the other end of the place, he could see a cavalcade coming toward him. There were nine horses in all, but only the two leaders were mounted. Another half minute and the steeds were safe within the shelter of the forest, and Bolly and Roaring Ralph beside him.

Their mission had been accomplished, but not without an adventure, for, meeting with a brave just as they gained the *corral*, he had to be disposed of before they could go on with the business that brought them there. The quick alarm to the North had caused them to hasten, but they had arrived all safe.

Blue Beans and the Indian chief crept around the outskirts of the village, and finding the wind in their favor, rapidly set to work firing the grass. The success of their undertaking has already been chronicled. So rapidly did the alarm follow that the two firebrands were compelled to make a detour in order to reach the rendezvous.

To Jack Holmes and Rocky Joe came the real adventure of the night. They had found the prison lodge and rescued the gallant major and the three were on their way to the lodge in which the young girl was confined, according to Harry Belmont's account, when the fire broke out.

The glare soon became so bright that the success of their mission was despaired of. At this critical moment, a figure rushing out of a lodge as if in alarm at the rising shouts and the roar of the already-great conflagration, came face to face with them. It was no Sioux warrior, but a white man, dressed in border style. Rocky Mountain Joe recognized in him the murderer of the old ranger, Tom Grampus, whose death they had sworn to avenge.

All else was forgotten in this supreme moment. Giving an almost inarticulate cry of mingled rage and satisfaction, he leaped upon the desperado like a panther, threw him violently to the ground, whispered some words hoarsely in his ear, and then plunged his bowie into the man's breast.

Several dusky figures had sped past, but the Indians seemed to have no eyes for anything save the fiery demon who threatened to wipe their village out of existence.

The rescuers crouched low in the dark shadow for several minutes. Then, as about all of the village's inmates seemed to be fighting the flames, their path lay before them without an obstacle in it.

Another minute and they were at the lodge pointed out by the soldier, as that in which May Hasly was confined. Jack Holmes took it upon himself to enter, as the major seemed too excited for steady work.

The young hunter quickly reappeared, and with him the post-commander's daughter. Jack at once resigned her to the soldier, and it was Belmont's arm that assisted her along.

Their route to the rendezvous was clear, and, led by Rocky Joe, they shortly reached it, to find Pandey chafing at the long delay, and on the point of ordering a reckless charge on the town.

Now that all were safe, a hasty mount was next in order, and with old Pandey at the head they started through the forest, leaving the blazing village in their rear.

CHAPTER X.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE MOUNTAIN CANYON.

The sun was sinking to rest in a glowing bed of crimson and gold. A gentle wind, that increased in force as the night drew nearer, rustled the long prairie grass, and blew in the faces of those who galloped so madly onward over the level stretch.

Far down in the southern horizon a black bank of clouds could be seen that gave indications of

a coming storm, which, however, might not break for hours.

There were two parties in sight on the afternoon in question, and the larger seemed to be in pursuit of the smaller. The wind occasionally veered in its course a little and wafted fierce yells and angry shouts from the pursuers that proved them to be the red-men of the plains. They were some sixty in number.

The fugitives were of course our nine friends, led by old Pandey Ellis. When Bolly and Roaring Ralph managed to get in the corral at the Indian village, they found the horses prancing about wildly, as the light was already showing at the northern end of the village. Having no time to spare, they were compelled to take the first animals they could lay hands on.

Three of these were good beasts, and the soldier and May Hasly found themselves mounted on their own steeds. The other had fallen to the lot of the old prairie prince.

How came the Indians to overtake them when in sight of the mountains? Simply because the Sioux had led horses among them, and the pursuit was kept up continually, whereas the fugitives were compelled to stop now and then to rest their animals. Whenever the horse of a red rider gave out, he mounted the led one and suffered the other to drop behind, to be found by the second party that was to leave the village when those out on the buffalo hunt came in.

Pandey rode in the advance, with Roaring Ralph close to him. Ever and anon the old ranger would turn his head and take a sweeping survey of their savage pursuers, after which he would seemingly form an estimation of some sort in his head, that doubtless concerned their chances of escape.

"Which I think we kin do it, Bolly," he at length said to the reckless ranger.

"Snuffers an' shootin' irons! it's ter be hoped so, ole hoss," answered that worthy.

Then, after this brief interchange of opinions, silence fell upon them again. On they galloped, with the Indians thundering in their rear. Lucky for the fugitives it was, that the mountains were so near at hand, else they would never have reached them except by the merest chance, for their horses were thoroughly worn out, and at times staggered as though drunk.

Had the circumstances been against them, there would have been no other course left to the fugitives beyond a halt upon the open prairie, with their horses for a living fortification between them and the enemy. Such a proceeding could hardly have been anything less than sure death. True, their rifles were deadly ones, and Pandey carried sixteen lives in his new weapon, but the Sioux would go through tactics entirely foreign to those of the Southern Indians.

There would be no riding in a death-circle here, thus giving the sharpshooters a chance to pick them off gradually. Had the fugitives been brought to a halt on the open plain, some of their red foes would have crept up through the long grass and sent bullet after bullet among the whites, without running the risk of a shot in return.

Therefore, Pandey Ellis was rejoiced that they now had a prospect of reaching the mountains, where a stand might be taken with some show of success.

While the sun, half shrouded in light clouds that had heretofore been fleecy white ones, but which now shone out with the various hues of the rainbow, was throwing his last lingering rays upon the prairie, the old ranger examined the mountain ranges before him intently. A split seemed to run up its rugged side, and this old Pandey recognized as a canyon.

Savans, learned men one and all, have come to a conclusion in regard to the mountains of Colorado, and to the north of it. This country was once a volcanic region. The rocks of the mountains have once been subjected to a terrible heat. The fissures that sometimes, being passable, go by the name of canyons, were without doubt the result of contraction of the earth's surface after being furiously heated, as all the volcanic regions of to-day possess them, in a degree more or less defined.

Pandey Ellis may have known absolutely nothing in regard to the origin of these mountain crevices, but he saw that there was one before them, and this fact he hailed with pleasure, as the range seemed at that distance to be otherwise inaccessible, at least to horses, and for them to continue their course along the level land would have been equivalent to courting death, in a very short time.

Seeing the object those whom they pursued had in view, the Sioux exerted themselves to the utmost to increase their speed, and the ani-

mals they bestrode did manage to make a spurt under the combined influence of yells, blows and savage thrusts with sharp-bladed knives, but it came too late to be of service.

Pandey Ellis muttered something to himself that told of infinite satisfaction, when the first bowlder was reached and they found themselves close to the mountains that here suddenly reared their lofty battlements heavenward.

Ere long they were at the mouth of the canyon. It was rather wide at that point, with precipitous cliffs on either side, and as it ascended the mountains these walls came closer together until there seemed to be but a few yards' space between them.

Into this great fissure the fugitives entered, and began the ascent. There was no time granted to them for reflection; they could not tell whether the canyon would eventually prove a source of safety, or a grim burial-ground for them all. It offered a chance, and in no other direction could they see even so much as this.

"Take Miss Hasly further up an' wait fur us, major," ordered Pandey, shortly.

The soldier made no reply, but at once set about obeying. He knew full well what work the rangers intended doing, and although he would have liked nothing better than a share in the exciting defense, he possessed no weapons, and then again his first duty was to look after the welfare of May.

At a point where the narrow pass merged in the shadows of the high wall the seven men came to a halt. The horses were immediately taken to the rear and fastened there.

Then the hunters crouched in the half-gloom, waiting for the tragedy to commence. Loud upon the clear air rung the hoof-strokes of many wild riders, as the Indians came rushing forward, heedless of everything save that those whom they pursued bade fair to escape among the defiles of the mountains, not that darkness was only an hour or so away.

They reached the wide mouth of the canyon, that seemed to invite an entrance. Not an instant did they stop, but rushed pell-mell into the rift. It admitted of their passage entire at first, but presently the walls began to come gradually nearer, and hence the Indians soon found it necessary to drop into files of three or four abreast.

It was when this critical point was reached that the crack of a rifle awoke the slumbering echoes of the mountains. One of the foremost riders gave a death-scream, and plunged from his seat to the rocks below, with a bullet through his body.

It was Bolly Wherrit who had fired the fatal shot, and, as if it was a signal for hostilities to begin, the rattle of half-a-dozen rifles drowned the echoes of this first shot; but now the infuriated savages pressed on until the fatal revolvers came into play, but among the reports could be heard the continued crack of a rifle. It was Pandey Ellis with his elegant sixteen-shooter.

The execution was fearful. A perfect hail-storm of bullets seemed to be rattling among the Sioux, every one of which carried death and destruction along with it. Unable to stand this hurricane, the Indians came to an abrupt pause, wavered for an instant, and then those who were able hastened to retreat, leaving a mass of horses and riders lying cold in death in the yawning depths of the canyon.

"Dust my Sunday breeches, we got 'em," howled Roaring Ralph.

"Don't shout till ye're outen ther woods, Rally," warned Pandey. "Wat's ter be done air a puzzler. We dar'n't let 'em foller us, an' ther on'y way air ter git 'em in a trap like."

CHAPTER XI.

RED WOLVES ON THE TRAIL.

TEN minutes had gone by.

A terrible silence brooded over the great mountain range, and the prairie that stretched out toward the north. This was only broken at intervals by the cry of some wretch, in the canyon below, lingering in his last agony, or, it might be, the melancholy, long-drawn howl of a gaunt wolf, whose keen scent had already caught the signs of the slaughter, and who was more than anxious to begin his horrid banquet.

Ever and anon a strange moaning sound came down the mountain, that seemed peculiar until one understood that it was caused by the rising wind rushing through the ragged, rocky passes and defiles that marked the summit of the range a mile or so beyond the spot where the late tragedy had been enacted.

The heavy black clouds that had erstwhile been lying low along the horizon were now scurrying overhead in irregular masses, and

threatening to bring darkness sooner than would otherwise have been the case. A tremendous rain-storm, a flood in fact, was pending. It might come in ten minutes, and again it might delay for half an hour, but in the end it was inevitable.

The situation of affairs had not changed materially. Having lost many of their best men, and being beaten back, the Sioux held a short council. They were determined to carry the matter through, and the question of retreat never entered their thoughts. All they wanted to decide upon was the manner of their next assault.

Horses were out of the question, and so they were left behind while the braves began to make their way up the canyon. They reached the spot where so many of their comrades lay, and passed it. The place which had so lately been occupied by their enemies was gained. Still not a shot broke upon the air.

The Sioux were not deceived, however; they knew that it was a band of prairie rangers with whom they fought, and bitter experience told them what to expect. Still they were fully determined to push on to the end, and so continued their stealthy march up the continually-narrowing canyon.

Far up in that dark crevice that seemed to split the range in two, seven figures crouched, waiting for the expected onslaught. Pandey was the lucky man who first sighted the foe, this time, and the report of his rifle boomed out loud and clear upon the air. A red form arose from the rocks just at the bend below, gave a yell that was only half uttered, and then sunk back to the cold bed from which it had just arisen.

Their advance was now discovered, and all hopes of taking the enemy by surprise done away with, so that there was now no further use in concealment.

Relying mainly on their rapid motions, and the friendly shadows, the Sioux rushed up the pass. Through the gloom the watchers could see them coming, and the deadly rattle of rifles blended in one continuous roar.

It was a perfect slaughter-pen, for in such narrow quarters the bullets of the fugitives could not fail to reach the mark every time. No wonder the Sioux came to a dead halt. The bravest and most experienced soldier in the universe might have been pardoned for hesitating in the face of this stream of fire that carried death in its flames.

Those who had rounded the bend and were not killed, hastened to throw themselves upon the rocks, while the number who had not yet come in sight, wisely remained where they were.

Buffalo Horn, one of the party, was almost crazy with rage. To the day of his death the chief was noted for his stubborn nature which had often gained him a battle, and he would not give up the pursuit of these daring pale-faces as long as he could get men to follow him.

Again they advanced, this time more cautiously, for the chief had resolved to pursue different tactics. He would push forward until the whites were brought to bay again, and then keep them engaged, with the expectation of an immediate attack, until the second band of warriors could get across the mountain-range by means of another pass several miles away, and intercept their flight.

Once he had them in such a trap and all would be plain sailing. He sent a warrior down the canyon to be on hand when the other division came to hand, and give them his orders, for they might be expected at any minute now.

That messenger was a lucky fellow, although he did not realize it until afterward, for his comrades were going further into a trap all the while, although it was not of the fugitives' springing. Of that, more anon.

Having dispatched this brave to where their horses were gathered, on the level land below, Buffalo Horn ordered an advance. This time they were exceedingly careful, not having any particular desire to run their heads into the lion's mouth again.

As the Indians supposed, the whites had retreated again after that last fierce little tussle. It was Pandey who urged them to do this, for the old trapper chief had some notion in his wise head, which as yet he had not imparted to the rest.

Some distance above they came upon the soldier and May Hasly. Pandey spoke a few words to the major, who immediately continued his way upward. The seven friends with the horses came after him, moving more slowly.

They were now over half-way up the mountains. At times the labor of climbing had been severe, but as a general thing the pass was

sably smooth, as though at some time it had been the bed of a mountain torrent. Pandy Ellis noted this fact and many more, for nothing seemed to escape his sharp eyes.

After five minutes more of climbing, they came to a spot where the ground presented an admirable spot for a stand, as several boulders would afford excellent shelter should the Indians take it upon themselves to use their guns. Above this point one of the walls sloped a little, and might be scaled by vigorous climbers, but below it, down to the very prairie, the sides of the pass were almost perpendicular.

Pandy determined to make a stand here, as the Indians must not come above this point, if the terrible plan he had in his head was to work.

Just as they were ensconcing themselves behind these boulders, a sharp whistle rent the air a little distance above them. It was the signal Pandey had directed the soldier to give when he found a place where the horses could leave the canyon, and it informed the old ranger that he had reached such a point.

Jack Holmes and Roaring Ralph were dispatched upward with the tired animals, while the rest, having reloaded all of their weapons, lay in wait for the red-skins, like so many spiders watching for flies, only in this instance the flies were seeking the lives of the spiders.

The two hunters had little difficulty in making their way upward, so far as the nature of the ground was concerned, but the darkness that was settling like a pall upon the face of nature threatened to hinder them a little. Above the point where the fugitives were lying in wait, the walls began to assume the appearance of banks more and more with every step, and as there was little danger of their meeting any obstacle, the two rangers urged the horses forward.

In a few minutes the major's cheery voice was heard calling to them from the left bank, and upon trial, it was found that, by taking advantage of the lightning-flashes that came faster every minute, they could see well enough to lead the horses to the top of the bank where the soldier stood. They found several trees there to which the animals were secured, and then the two commenced to make their way down to their companions again.

"Looks like we're going to have a rain-storm," ventured Jack at length.

"Painters an' powder-horns! so it do now. I've been lookin' at the sky for some time back, an' I reckon we're going to be flooded right outer hyar. That canyon below thar will be a regular sluice. I wonder if Pandey thort o' thet? Tw'd be jist like him. Yes sree, you'll see sum fun wen that rain comes, Jack. Reminds me o' the old times in the Colorado canyon, it do now. Thet lightnin' air perfectly blindin'."

Bang! went a rifle at this instant, the echoes rumbling along the mountains, until the growl of the distant thunder drowned them.

"The fun's commenced. Let's get down in time to lend a hand," cried Jack.

While the two are descending the canyon as fast as the darkness will permit, we will return once more to those whom we left lying in ambush among the rocks.

After their two friends had departed with the horses, Pandey and his four companions selected certain of the boulders and ensconced themselves behind them, lying in wait for the enemy. With every fleeting second the gloom seemed to gather around them more intensely, until even the outlines of the canyon walls were merged in the general darkness.

"I'm mighty much afraid we won't be able to see 'em when the time comes," Rocky Mountain Joe remarked at length.

"Don't fret, Joey. They won't be hyar fur a leetle w'ile, 'cause the feelin' the'r way, ye see. By ther time they cum, I think we'll hev illuminashun enuff, 'less my kalkerlashun air lop-sided. Keep yer eyes peeled fur a torch from heaven," adjured wise old Pandey Ellis.

Sure enough, the lightning was playing faster and with a far greater brilliancy than when he last thought fit to notice it. Soon it seemed almost one continuous glare, and the distant rumble of thunder proclaimed that the storm was at length approaching. Like so many specter forms the five men crouched behind their separate rocks, and while the heavenly fireworks continued, waited for the turn of events.

CHAPTER XII.

AN AVALANCHE OF DEATH.

CRACK! The sharp report of old Pandey's rifle boomed out upon the night air. He had caught a glimpse of a painted face, as the war-

rior peered around the rocks, and Betsy Jane, the old rifle so lately rescued from the hands of the cache thief, Spotted Coyote, gave the venturesome red-skin his quietus.

As the death-yell of the Sioux brave pealed out, the ranger quietly exchanged the discharged rifle for his new-fangled affair, which was pleasing him highly with its working, although he could not quite get over his old-time prejudice against anything that threatened the annihilation of his favorite.

The five men were in readiness for an immediate assault, but none came. They could hear the Indians calling to each other in the narrow canyon, but not a man came in sight. Matters were still in this shape when Roaring Ralph and Jack Holmes joined them. The old reckless ranger was deeply disappointed when he found that there was not to be a terrific combat.

"Shoot me fur a greaser, I kim down here like a two-forty steam engine so as ter be on hand, an' now they jest wanter lie down an' do nothing. May I be chawed up by a alligator, an' roasted on the end o' a two-pronged pitchfork if I stand it. I'm a rearin', tearin' thunderbolt from the Colorado canyon, that's me, Roarin' Ralph Sedunk Rockwood, you bet; an' if sumpin' don't stir them reds up in the space o' five minutes I'm goin' down thar myself w' a stick. Ye hear me now?"

He was known to be a perfect dare-devil, and had any one of those present ventured to question his willingness to do just as he said, there can be no doubt but what he would have put his threat into execution.

Pandy however laid a hand on his arm.

"Keep quiet, ole man," said he, "an' ye'll see them pesky reds stirred up like as if a hornet's nest had been throwed in among 'em. Thar's a greater power than ours gittin' ready ter sweep 'em ter eternity if they ain't mighty spry. Listen ter that, now!"

A sullen roar that gradually increased to a booming sound. Heaven's artillery was at work; the storm was at hand.

"Beavers an' barnacles! ye're right, Pandey Ellis. Thar's goin' ter be sum lively times for them reds unless they skeddaddle pirty quick. I'd give sumpin' ter be sumwhar so that I c'd see 'em," declared Roaring Ralph.

"Cum, boyees, we must make a sorter retreat ter whar ther major air, 'less we wanter run ther danger o' being caught ourselves. We'll wait hyar, tho', till she begins ter run powerful like. Up on ther bank w' ye, an' hunt w'at shelter ther air, but keep an eye out fur ther reds. They hev a plan o' ther own, an' hope we'll run at ther fust sprinkle, so they kin crawl up hyar. Ef they wait that long, they'll git it sure."

"Here she comes," cried Blue Beans.

"Mustangs an' Mexikins! what a douser it air! Hold on fur life, boyees, if ye don't wanter git swept away. Them pore reds, how I does pity 'em," laughed Rockwood.

The storm was upon them.

Such a deluge the rangers never saw before. The rain seemed to come down in perfect sheets, and in ten seconds, as it seemed, the ground was soaked, while little streams began to flow down the bank, all of them moving toward the canyon.

A continuous flash of lightning seemed to illuminate the scene, and the friends could see the Indians wading up the torrent which in this almost incredible space of time, had formed in the pass, and was already knee-deep.

The sharp detonations of the western rifles sounded the death-knell of some of the leading ones, and the rest, as if realizing that to come above the bend was to rush upon their doom, retreated precipitously out of sight.

Onward swept the mountain torrent with rapidly increasing depth. Every ten seconds brought it a foot or so higher, as fresh streams rushed into this common channel.

The canyon up which they had so recently come was now occupied by a rushing, boiling, foaming, roaring, seething mass of angry yellow water, that sped down the steep inclined plane with a fury that was awful to contemplate, and which constantly increased as the seconds sped by.

Just after discharging their arms, the hunters heard the cries of the now-terrified brutes as, plunging through the water, they began to make their descent to the plain far below. With every yard their progress became more difficult, for the caldron of waters seemed to grow in point of size miraculously.

They had known their danger, and while Buffalo Horn and a portion of his braves had hastened to descend, when it became evident that they were speedily to have a terrible storm,

the remainder had stayed where they were. These were for the most part, young braves, who, headstrong as all persons to whom age has not taught wisdom, thought they knew best.

There was a little trick they would work, and surprise their elders. When the storm broke the enemy would hasten to places of shelter, leaving the way open for them to reach the bank above before the torrent gained any material depth. A very wise little plan indeed, but, unfortunately, like many others, it was doomed to be frustrated. The young braves did not know the mettle of old prairie rangers.

How the scheme succeeded, the reader has already seen. The Indians had placed themselves in a death-trap, and it seemed as if not one of them would escape alive. There were a dozen who started the descent after the rifle-crack and hurling bullets had warned them that there was no hope of reaching the sloping bank above. Before two minutes had passed away the water was above their knees, and rising rapidly. Such was its force, that they could hardly keep erect.

The lightning played vividly, and lighted up the narrow pass. In despair they glared around them for some spot where they could pull themselves up out of the reach of the angry waters, but not a crevice could they see; on either hand the high walls stretched up almost to the black thunder-clouds as it seemed, presenting an unbroken face, as if they had been smooth marble.

The end was inevitable. One or two warriors, brave at the last, finding that their doom was sealed, faced the angry flood and settled down to resist it, but nothing human could stand before such a mighty rush of water, and they were speedily whirled down through the death canyon, their last shrieks being drowned by the roar of the yellow avalanche.

Buffalo Horn and his warriors had just reached the plain when the water began to run out of the canyon. Unmindful of the rain they stood and watched, fearing the worst.

Soon the yellow flood grew into immense proportions, and upon reaching the level land, rushed out twenty yards and more churned into foam, before it spread. Not one of those twelve braves was ever seen alive. A human form was washed to the very feet of the chief. He stooped down and examined the Sioux.

He was badly mangled, but it was from contact with the rocks, and not the weapons of the white men. Nothing more was needed to tell the great chief what had happened, and there would be much mourning in the village over the rash young braves who were not.

The end was not yet.

Buffalo Horn thought that he had seen the last of the white hunters who had wrought so much harm on him and his, but in this he was mistaken, as subsequent events will prove.

Pandy Ellis and his six friends stood in the rain, watching the pass as well as they could by the glare of the lightning. When the fact became positive that no red-skin could make his way up against the stormy water that rushed through the canyon as if it had been a sluiceway, they began to think it was time to seek shelter.

It was hard work moving at all in the drenching rain, but they managed to find an overhanging rock where they stood until the deluge came down less heavily. Then they climbed the mountain, under the direction of Jack Holmes and Roaring Ralph, who guided them to where the young soldier and May Haaly were. They found them in a cleft where they were screened from the fury of the rain. In this place they also ensconced themselves, and although soaking wet, yet they were in good spirits. Roaring Ralph particularly so. He could not get over the catastrophe that had befallen the warlike Sioux.

"Tie me up in a blanket, less I go ter pieces a-laughin', but thet war an all-powerful event. Just fancy them reds a-comin' up the canyon as bold as larks, an' then, how slick they went back again! I'd 'a' given sumpin' to hev seen the ole chief Buffalo Horn agoin' down like as if he war sailin' for the infernal regions. Hoopee! I'll never get over it. Thar, I'm off ag'in," and if to shake all over like a bowl of jelly, meant being "off," the reckless ranger was certainly in that condition.

They had heard the stentorian tones of the great war-chief above the rumbling thunder, a few minutes before the storm broke, and had taken it for granted that Buffalo Horn had made the ride with the rest of the ill-fated red-men, not having been able to distinguish what he said.

Old Pandy was ruefully feeling of his new buck-skins, which not being coated with grease like those of his comrades were well soaked by the rain.

The fury of the storm was now about over. Pandy was delighted when the major showed him a little bundle of dry sticks, he had gathered before the rain came, thoughtfully reasoning that they might be needed. In five minutes the faces of the little party were lighted up by the blaze of a fire, around which they gathered, to dry their clothes, and also their weapons.

Here they remained during the remainder of the night, thinking that all danger from the Sioux was past, now that the head chief was gone, little suspecting what lay in store for them.

When morning came a survey of the plain was taken. Here and there a silent form could be seen lying upon the ground, but not a living creature was in sight. After a hasty breakfast, they mounted, and continued their journey over the mountains, hoping to reach the other side by dusk.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD BETSY JANE'S LONG SHOT.

"We are in a nice pickle."

It was Rocky Mountain Joe who spoke and there was none to deny his assertion. Complete silence seemed to assume full sway.

Back of them the mountains arose, tier on tier, stretching away on either hand, and outlined against the clear blue heaven. In front lay the valley of the great Missouri river. Human agency could not find a path up the stream on this shore, such was the labyrinth of rocks that were piled up mountain high. On another side, indeed directly below them, lay the yellow river, and from where they stood they could look down upon its muddy surface.

Down the stream and on the same shore, not half a mile away, a large band of mounted Indians were coming toward them. To go up the mountain again in the exhausted condition of their horses was utterly out of the question, and no wonder there was not a contradictory voice when Rocky Joe, who was perfectly at home among the stony heights, announced that they were in a bad fix.

In the far west, the sun was just sinking out of sight behind the ridges that indicated the rolling prairie. They had halted to survey the river as it boomed along hundreds of feet below, and to determine upon their future course, when the eagle eyes of old Pandy Ellis caught sight of the large band of Sioux who had just made their appearance around a sort of bend some distance away.

The last rays of the sun shone for an instant upon their painted forms and gaudy trappings, and even at this distance Pandy was ready to declare that they belonged to the village of the head chief, Buffalo Horn.

He wasted no time in idle scrutiny, but while the others were watching, his keen gray orbs were roving in another direction.

A loud, clear yell, followed by a chorus of short, sharp yelps such as a pack of hounds might give utterance to upon striking a trail, proclaimed the fact of their being seen, and the Indians started their horses on faster.

Pandy smiled grimly. At the same time a look full of satisfaction came into his eyes, as if he had caught sight of that for which he looked.

"Ef we stay hyar, we're gone up. I think thar's a spot up hyar w'at I suitus fur a fort. Foller me, right lively," he ordered.

Helter-skelter came the Indians, rushing on, but the retreat of the little band although rapid, was not disorderly. The trapper chief led the way in among the rocks, and old Roaring Ralph burst out into an exclamation of satisfaction, that terminated in a wild shout when he discovered what manner of place they had stumbled upon.

"Rub me ag'in' a hay-cutter! Didn't I think this hyar place looked familiar like? H't me inter a 'Pache's grave! I've been hyar, an' fought hyar, an' kim near leavin' my ole bones hyar for good. Will I ever forget them times?" and as if there was not an enemy within miles, the Colorado ranger sprang to a certain place where the rocks rose in a pyramid-like form. He was curiously watched by Pandy and the major, while the others kept watch on the reds.

"Then this place has seen a fight before?" said the ranger interrogatively.

"Seen a scrimmage! My dear major, you've heard o' this place; an' you too, Pandy Ellis. This air Dead Man's Hole."

"Air it possible?" ejaculated the old ranger, surveying the place with a new interest.

"W'ale-bones an' w'ite-wash! it air! Behind

these here rocks three of us held out ag'in' nigh on a hundred Sioux fur two days. Thar war Wild Bill, Kickapoo Dan an' myself. Poor Dan went under, and we buried him, Bill an' me, under that great pile o' rocks."

"How did you get out of the scrape?" asked the major, full of interest, for they might have to use the same means.

"Didn't git outen it. Bill and I war half killed ourselves an' yanked off ter the town. Bill, he managed ter escape, but I lay sick fur a long time. I'd 'a' been all right in a day or two if it hadn't been fur the ole medicine-man, what stuffed all sorts o' things down my gullet. At last they pronounced me well enough to run the gantlet, the next day, but w'en the time kim ole Ralph warn't thar, 'cause Wild Bill had paid him a visit in the night, an' helped him off."

During this conversation the others had kept a close watch upon the Indians. They came plunging madly on until within easy range of the fort, and then brought up in a confused mass. Whether it was the guns of the fugitives, plainly seen above the ramparts, or vivid recollections of a former severe tussle on this very same ground, that caused this sudden halt, it would be impossible to say, but the fact was apparent that they no longer advanced toward the whites.

There were perhaps fifty of the red braves in the band. They were still huddled up in a confused mass as if engaged in earnest discussion regarding their enemies, when a commotion appeared among them. A loud yell went pealing over the rocks, and to the surprise of our friends it was answered from the side of the mountain. Upon looking up, what was their astonishment to see a second band of Indians descending the very canyon they had so lately used.

They were not far from being equal in number to those who already blocked the path which the whites would have taken had they been allowed to depart from the place. At the head of this second band rode a chief whom they recognized even in the gathering twilight as their deadly foe, the head chief.

"Dust my Sunday breeches if it ain't Buffalo Horn!" exclaimed Roaring Ralph.

"It was evident, then, that the chief had escaped the dreadful fate that had overtaken his braves, when the avalanche rushed down upon them. How this had been done there was no time to inquire, nor was there the remotest possibility of finding out, even had they decided to pry into the matter. It was quite enough for them that the great warrior and leader had escaped, and that he was leading his braves forward again, more determined than ever to crush his mortal foes.

Pandy Ellis looked grave. He was in truth troubled, although he tried his best not to show it. His many glances toward May Hasly showed the tenor of his thoughts. For himself the old trapper chief cared little. He had roamed the broad prairies too long to think aught of danger, save that it must be continually incurred in a trapper's life.

"Poor leetle gal, I'm sorry fur her. I didn't think ther major war so foolish, but then w'en a feller's in love he don't do anything like a reasonable critter. He had no idee o' comin' this fur on'y ther general chased 'em, an' they w'u'dn't guv in. Wal, wal, this air no time fur reflectshuns. We must git ter work an' settle up ther place, fur I'm mighty afraid we'll stay hyar longer'n we wanter. Fust o' all, I'll try ole long-range, Betsy Jane. Ther major hez her, but I reckon I kin borry ther ole pet fur ther occashun. Them reds air too close; I'll teach 'em a lesson."

Pandy had handed over his old Western rifle to the soldier, but he soon had it in his hands again. He had no faith in the far-shooting qualities of the new-fangled weapon, although he had pronounced it a "powerful handy affair in close quarters."

Old Betsy Jane was swung to his shoulder and held stationary for a few seconds until he had sighted one of the red horsemen in the first band. Then a sharp crack reverberated among the mountain gorges, sounding with unusual distinctness in the clear air of the evening.

Before it had quite died away, one of the mounted Indians was seen to throw his hands above his head, and the wild cry that went pealing over the distance, and reverberating from hundreds of rocky cliffs, proclaimed that there was one more Sioux brave on the long trail leading to the happy hunting-grounds of the red-men.

The warrior fell to the ground, and, warned of their dangerous proximity, the rest of the party turned their horses' heads and made haste to place more ground between their pre-

cious bodies and the long-range rifles of those behind the stockade.

Pandy laughed quietly to himself as he noted the effect of his shot.

"I knowed ole Betsy Jane w'u'd fetch 'em every time. Reckon az how she air ter be depended on in an emergency. 'Be off wid ther ole love afore ye're on wid ther new,' az ther feller sez, but I'll never quit lovin' Betsy Jane even tho' I hang on ter this new-fangled affair. Now, ef ye'll gather 'round me, kumrades, we'll see w'at kin be did in ther premises."

Every one of them was perfectly willing to give the whole affair into the hands of the veteran, knowing full well that if there was a man on the plains who could get them out of their terrible situation, that individual was Pandi Ellis.

Roaring Ralph had been cooped up in this place two days, and yet Pandy seemed to know more about it than the reckless Colorado ranger, albeit he had only taken a sweeping survey of the ground, and that under circumstances that did not allow a close scrutiny.

It was a natural rocky fort in the great wilderness. On the upper side it was quite inaccessible, so that there was not the slightest danger of the Indians getting above them and firing down upon their unprotected bodies. Then the back consisted of space, for it was upon the edge of the steep bluff, and hundreds of feet below the yellow water of the Missouri roared and spluttered as it rushed along its rocky channel.

The front and lower side consisted of a pile of rocks higher than a tall man, and whose ponderous weight and immense size precluded all possibility of their having been moved into their present position by human agency. It would have required great machines and engines to have budged one of these huge boulders that had been piled up so neatly by the deft hand of nature.

Behind these natural breastworks the fugitives gathered around Pandi Ellis to hear his directions, while the Sioux seemed to be settling down for a regular siege, and, with matters in this shape, darkness arrived upon the scene.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CAMP ON THE BLUFF.

UPON the very ascent where we first saw the young fugitives of the North-west, a band of soldiers had encamped. They were twenty-five in number, and the horses that were picketed close by proclaimed them to be United States cavalry.

The officer with the iron-gray hair and fierce military mustache, whose stern look was occasionally changed into one of care, was Colonel Hasly, sometimes called "the general."

Beside him stood a frontiersman, dressed in buck-skin garments and carrying the inevitable weapons of his craft. This individual was a scout of some renown, known upon the border as Fire-Flash Frank. His greatest deeds were accomplished with the long rifle he carried, and such was his skill at marksmanship, that there were people who believed he could do anything under the sun with his firearms.

A serious expression rested on the scout's face that tallied with the troubled look worn by the post commander, and it was evident that the conversation, just dropped for a brief period while each communed with his thoughts, had not been of a very pleasant nature to either of them.

At length the prairie scout turned to his old and well-loved commander.

"Well, general, thar's no use in our crying over spilt milk. The young ones were here, that I'll swear to, but we've come too late. Why they ain't been gobbled up by the reds afore now I can't see, for they've been in the hot-bed of the hostiles for days past."

"There can be no chance that you are wrong in your surmises?" questioned the officer with a faint glimmer of hope.

"Not the least, general. The trail is as plain as daylight. They've been captured by a mighty likely squad of the reds. Thar can be no doubt but that they're from Buffer Horn's village, so you see the case ain't as bad as it might be. From the way they kept on I was beginning to believe we never would come up with 'em, and that we'd fetch up at the Pacific or the Polar sea yet, but now, don't ye see, we have 'em safe. The reds won't dar' to offer 'em any indignity—at least the gal; as for the young critter ye don't car' much if they do run him in the fire a leetle; he deserves something like that for carrying off your daughter."

"For Heavens sake, say not so. I would not have a hair of his head harmed for the world,

for I love Harry Belmont as if he were my own son," and the officer strode away from the scout's side, as if to hide the terrible emotion that shook his frame.

"Now, that's pesky queer," muttered the prairie scout, gazing after his commander in the gloaming, "yes, almighty queer. He loves the boy like a father. What on earth do he mean then, refusing to let him have the gal? Thar's nothing in the way that I kin see. Blame the luck, if he had only told me that, in the start, instead of looking so glum and stern, this here pursuit would have been a heap sight livelier than it has. Why, I thort he was death on my boy, and concluded it was better the young folks went on till they were captured by the reds, than fall into his hands. Loves Harry after all! Well, well, if that don't just knock spots off'n all I've ever seen or heard. Then thar's one thing settled: we must get 'em away from the pesky Sioux. Mebbe we'll have a wedding at the fort yet, who knows? I think I'll take a leetle scout, seeing that they camp here. I may run across another of them 'ere signs about old Pandey Ellis' sculp. Wonder if they've bagged that old 'coon yet? Thar ain't no doubt but what he's a match for all the imps of the prairies put together, the wolf-sculper air," and with a knowing shake of his head the guide left the camp, plunging into a labyrinth of rocks and bushes that bounded it on one side.

When Colonel Hasly left the scout so suddenly, his frame was shaken with some emotion that would not be repressed. The mention of the awful fact that the young fugitives were now in the power of the Indians may have had some effect upon him, as I have no doubt it had, but there was something behind this that brought great tears to eyes that were utterly unused to weeping.

"It is coming home to me," he groaned, when he found himself alone, "and I deserve it, too. For the simple reason that I was unwilling to bear the shame, I have brought this down upon my own head. I wonder if Harry can ever forgive me. Poor children! I should have explained it all when I first saw symptoms of love between you, instead of using my utmost efforts for a separation. I am being punished bitterly for my deceit, yet God knows how willingly I would take it all upon my shoulders if they were spared. How will it end? Heaven alone knows, but I am utterly wretched. Love Harry! Ay, as the apple of my eye; equally as dear to my heart as little May. Will he ever forgive me, I wonder?" and the officer groaned aloud in his soul anguish.

They had reached this point just half an hour before sundown, being several days behind the fugitives, as the trail had been lost at a point where young Belmont had caused the two steeds to walk quite a distance along a water-course. This and sundry other devices on the part of the young man had deceived even the scout of the expedition, Fire-Flash Frank, and that worthy was ready to admit the young soldier an adept in the way of throwing pursuers off the trail, even though he thought Harry crazy to bring the girl to the wilderness, that teemed with hostile Indians and savage beasts.

The shades of night gradually settled over the bluff, and darkness rendered everything invisible save where it was outlined in a vague way against the star-gemmed heavens.

A fire had been started by the soldiers, but, as they were few in number to be caught in this hostile country, they took the cautious words of the scout to heart, and were careful to build the blaze at a point where it would be difficult to see it from almost any direction, unless the stroller actually stumbled upon it.

The cavalymen then proceeded to enjoy their own frugal supper, having seen that their horses were well provided for. They had left the fort hurriedly, and with but little preparation, having no idea of the long chase the fugitives would lead them, and their provisions had long since run out.

There was no such thing as starving in this land of plenty, however, and the rifle of the scout kept them supplied with fresh meat. They were surrounded by multiplied dangers, but if any Indians had seen them so far, they must have taken it for granted that the little body of soldiers intended having a conference with some of the leading chiefs, as they could not imagine their entering the Sioux country with hostile intent.

The very daring of their movement was thus likely to be their best safeguard, but, should the Indians once assail them, there would be but a small chance of their ever reaching the fort again, for the red-skins could muster fifty men

to every one of the soldiers, and well-armed, determined fighters at that.

The general slept but little during this night, but it was not the perils that surrounded them that caused his wakefulness; his thoughts continually roved to the young couple who had run away from the fort, and ever and anon a groan would break from the brave old soldier that must surely have been caused by something beyond the fact that his daughter was a prisoner in the Sioux village.

Far down in the gully the yellow Missouri rushed along its bed, and the murmur of the water failed to sing him to sleep. From the sides of the bluff, there ascended at intervals the long-drawn, mournful howl of the great gray wolf, sounding dismally through the stilly darkness of the night.

Then the fair moon peeped above the far-off eastern horizon, and cast a silvery sheen over every object upon which her enchanting rays chanced to fall. A lonely owl, perched upon a neighboring deadwood, gave vent to his feelings in solemn hoots, until frightened at last by the bright moon, he flew away to some dark gulch in search of legitimate prey.

Slowly the moon wheeled upward in her mighty cycle, and, wearied at length with his own direful thoughts, the soldier fell into a sound slumber.

He was awakened by a touch on the arm, and, springing to his feet, he found daylight at hand. The scout and trailer stood beside him.

"Breakfast, general, and then we'll settle down to work. If I know anything about this country, and I ought to, having been a captive among the Sioux for five years, we'll be knocking at the lodges of Buffalo Horn before it gets dark again."

The general's face brightened a trifle, but as he sat down to eat he presented the appearance of a man from whose soul hope had almost wholly fled. While they were eating, the sentry came in to report a solitary man making his way up the steep side of the bluff toward the north.

In another minute all those in the camp were looking down at the distant figure. The men saw him take off his broad-rimmed hat and wave it above his head, as if he were mightily pleased to set eyes on them. Through his field-glass the general saw more.

"Take this and look," said he to Fire-Flash Frank; "if I had not conclusive evidence of his death, I would swear that it was the prairie prince, old Pandey Ellis."

CHAPTER XV. A ROCKY FORTRESS.

LET us return to those whom we left behind the natural fort of rocks, with the Indians besieging them. As darkness came on apace they gathered around the white-haired Pandey Ellis, to whom each one looked as upon a leader.

The veteran knew the peril of their situation, none better, and he felt sure that their greatest danger would be, not in the assaults of the Indians, although these might be serious enough, but from starvation and thirst.

Before Pandey would say a word as to what the nature of their position was, he had whispered a few words to Belmont, who immediately took May Hasly to the edge of the bluff, to listen to the roar of the water below, as he said, but in reality to keep from her the true state of affairs.

Those who listened to the old ranger were therefore men who had faced grim death too often to quail at his presence; most of them daring and reckless as only frontiersmen can be, delighted in adventures, and but for the presence of the young girl in their midst would have asked nothing better than a savage and bloody bout with the warlike Sioux.

There was one who had May Hasly always in his mind. This was Jack Holmes, the handsome young fellow who pursued the roving life that follows a trapper, for mere love of adventure, and not because of necessity. He watched her wherever she went, and winced in actual pain at every lover-like movement of the young soldier. Oh! little did Jack suspect the glorious light that was lining his dark cloud with the silvery sheen!

There were eight of them to defend the little rocky fort against more than a hundred of their savage foes, who were armed with the best weapons Uncle Sam's money could procure and well versed in the crafty designs of their race. It would seem like terrible odds, especially when the ground was covered with the shades of night.

Not a man flinched nor trembled. Roaring Ralph and his two companions, the celebrated Wild Bill, and Kickapoo Dan, had held the fort

against a horde of these self-same braves for two whole days and nights, and had only given in when Dan had been killed and the others badly wounded by the storm of bullets that was sent among the rocks by the infuriated reds, who were growing desperate from their losses and the obstinate defense of the besieged.

Surely, then, these eight men could hold their own against the enemy for a time, and having old Pandey with them was a godsend, for the veteran's brain was fertile in schemes, and, where other men would be likely to fail, he invariably succeeded.

The moon would not make her appearance until about midnight, and in all probability their greatest danger would be during those hours of darkness, when the reds could creep close up to the barricade without being discovered.

On the other occasion when Roaring Ralph and his friends had been besieged in the same place, there had been no period of darkness, for the moon made her appearance soon after the sun had set, and remained in sight until almost daybreak, for the great hills that rose up were toward the north, and would not obstruct her light so long as she remained above the horizon.

Pandey wondered how the red-skins had managed to get close enough to send their bullets into the fort, but the reckless ranger soon informed him. There were no natural means of concealment, such as outlying boulders, except in the immediate vicinity, but the wily reds had made artificial ones, behind which they kept their precious bodies until close enough to rain in a fire of balls that did terrible execution.

At the time, the three friends had been so badly demoralized, and powerless to prevent the catastrophe, that they had fallen victims to the fury of the Sioux. Such an impression had this terrible event made upon the mind of the Colorado ranger, that he then and there swore a solemn oath that if he ever managed to get out of that scrape he would invent something to defeat the Indians should they ever make a similar attempt when he was around.

Perhaps he had received assistance somewhere, for Ralph, although a shrewd man in all things pertaining to prairie lore, was not learned in science, but he had by some manner of means obtained what he desired, and gloried in the thought that perhaps he would now have a chance to make use of the discovery upon the very field of his former defeat.

When darkness had fully covered the face of the earth, Pandey Ellis stationed his friends as best suited his purpose. The young girl was placed in a secure spot where she would be safe from any flying bullets, as were also the horses. Having accomplished this much, the old ranger looked to the line of defense.

Fortunately, the only route by which the Indians could reach the rocky fort was not more than twenty feet in width, so that the attention of the whole party could be concentrated upon this one spot without a fear of receiving an unexpected attack in the rear.

On one side stretched the high, white cliffs, utterly unscalable; on the other yawned the terrible gulch, deep down in which roared the turbid waters of the Missouri.

It was a death-trap for the unwary, and through this the Sioux were creeping. Many of the older braves spoke against it. They knew with whom they had to deal; the fight in the canyon had informed them that these bold enemies were their most deadly foes, the frontiersmen, than whom they would much rather fight a whole regiment of soldiers. Perhaps they also remembered the battle that had occurred before at this very point, and the number of their tribe who had fallen before the end was reached by strategy.

At any rate, their counsel was in vain, for the young braves felt their hot blood surging through their veins, and demanded to be led against the hated foe.

The night was not more than ordinarily dark. Our friends, looking over their rocky stockade, could see the white rocks for quite a little distance, and it must needs be a shrewd Indian who could crawl up unobserved.

Bolly Wheritt had stationed himself at the extreme end of the line, where his observation would extend much further than from any other point. Here the old ranger stood as motionless as a statue.

Time slipped by. Almost two hours had gone since nightfall, and there seemed some ground for the hope that perhaps, after all, the reds did not intend making any assault.

Bolly was thinking of his chum, and how wonderfully all of them had been deluded. All

the time, however, his eyes were on the look-out, and his ears open to catch any sound. Next to him stood the Chief, Powder Flash, and Bolly could hear the steady crunching of his teeth as the determined Indian gnawed away at the tough venison which he had sworn to finish or die in the attempt.

All at once Bolly's eye was attracted toward something dark that had appeared upon the white rock. By watching carefully he could make out that it was moving, and in the direction of the fort. This told him as plain as words, that it was an Indian.

His rifle sought his shoulder, but he waited until the approaching object had moved forward a dozen feet or so. Then glancing along the rifle-barrel, he took aim as well as was possible under the circumstances.

The sharp, whip-like crack sounded, and echoed along the deep gulch, dying gradually among the mountains. Bolly saw the dark form leap wildly erect, disclosing the shape of an Indian warrior. Then a loud shrill yell of mingled pain and despair rung out, and the ill-fated warrior fell lifeless upon the rocks.

Hardly had this occurred before a second rifle-shot broke the silence. Roaring Ralph, at the further end of the line, had caught sight of a warrior crawling along the very edge of the defile, and had let drive, with only a hasty aim.

No cry followed this shot, but he saw the man stagger to his knees, reel for an instant, and then vanish into the black depths of the great abyss.

This taught the hot-blooded warriors a lesson, and they realized that it was to be no child's-play or sham-battle. When these men used their rifles, death almost invariably followed, and they were now willing to listen to the words of wisdom from the lips of the older braves.

Nothing of note occurred during the remaining two hours of darkness. The Sioux seemed to realize that force alone could never dislodge or exterminate the white men who had found shelter in the rock-fort, and determined to use other means.

The friends could hear the distant sound of chopping, for a grove of trees grew upon the mountain-side, not half a mile away from the spot. From this the Colorado ranger judged that they intended trying the same tactics that had been so signally successful in the former fight, and he smiled grimly as he tapped lovingly a small knapsack which he had strapped between his shoulders.

Pandy Ellis did not have any great fear of his friends being overpowered, but he was afraid of their being starved into submission. He knew well enough that, although the reds might not be able to take the fort, those within it could not make their escape.

This thought worried him not a little, and at length he drew Harry Belmont aside and held a long conversation with him. The soldier gave him some news that at length decided the old ranger. If they all remained here until doomsday, no assistance could come to them; it must be sought for.

Pandy knew just where the place where the two fugitives had been captured by the Sioux, was situated. He had spent a day upon the bluff, looking down upon the view far below, and settling on his plan for deceiving Buffalo Horn and his braves.

This would most probably be the likeliest place where he could find the soldiers who were in pursuit of the young runaways, and the ranger had made up his mind for the trial.

If he failed, it would make their situation no worse, for an arm could not ward off the pangs of starvation. His situation was soon communicated to the rest, who expressed their faith in the veteran, but wondered how he intended leaving the fort. Pandy Ellis was equal to such an emergency, however.

CHAPTER XVI.

INTO THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH.

THE first movement of Pandy Ellis was a significant one, and explained his intended operations. He called for every man's lasso. In this way he became the possessor of four besides his own.

Be it known that men who range the plains of the South-west, invariably carry a hair-rope at their saddle-bow to coil around them in a circle at night in order to keep the snakes away, as these reptiles will never cross a hair-rope.

On the other side of the saddle is carried the lariat, which is used to tether the horse or to serve the man as a lasso. Bolly Wherrit, Roaring Ralph, Rocky Joe and Blue Beans each carried their lassoes with them, wrapped around

their waists, either because they considered the ropes too precious to be left behind, or else thought they should find some use for them.

Five of the besieged now had their lariats on hand, and old Pandy smiled when they were placed in his possession. Their length averaged thirty feet each, and when fastened securely together, they would probably measure about one hundred and forty feet.

It took Pandy some little time to so tie them that he would have no hesitation in trusting his weight to the long rope, but at length it was concluded. He and Bolly then went over to the edge of the deep gulch.

Below them was inky darkness. They could hear the sullen roar of the yellow Missouri, as the water plunged against the rocks, and Bolly looked a trifle dismayed, but his desire to take his chum's place would not be listened to by that worthy.

"It air rather hard on ther new buck-skins, ole hoss, I admit," the old fellow said, laughing, "but they hev ter git a christenin' sum time, ye know. I'll leave my rifle wid ye, Bolly, an' make good use o' it ef ther time cums, fur in close quarters it's jest b'u'tiful ter pour in ther bullets, an' ye'll find yer own nowhar. My revolver I've wrapped in 'iled silk so ther water kain't hurt it. Now, ef ye're ready, we'll solve ther problem about ther length o' ther rope, by mathematical persuasion, as ther feller sez."

Fastening a heavy stone to the end of the line, they lowered it into the black gulf until all of the rope but a yard or so was out, and then it seemed to have reached some firm foundation, for all of their efforts could not make it go down any further.

The moon was peeping above the eastern horizon when this trial began, and by the time the stone was hauled up again, she had wheeled into full view, and was flooding the earth with her silvery light, although the chasm seemed to appear darker than ever now in contrast to the surrounding scenery.

It was discovered that not only the stone, but a dozen feet of the rope had been wet by plunging into the river, and this was proof conclusive that the combined lassoes possessed sufficient length for Pandy to gain his end.

There was now no time to lose, as the moon was rising higher, and might possibly betray his actions to the Sioux. The bold fellow felt no fear in regard to his desperate undertaking. All his life had been a continual facing of danger, and he had grown so accustomed to meeting the grisly monster death in every conceivable shape, that the dread demon had lost all terror for him.

Having bidden his friend farewell, Pandy lowered himself over the edge of the bluff, and vanished from their sight. The end of the long rope had been secured to a projecting rock and a coat had been placed under it where it went over the edge, to prevent chafing from the constant motion.

Bolly had thrown himself down upon the rocks and held his fingers to the rope, just as a man might feel the pulse of a sick person. In this way he could tell just how his chum was getting on.

For perhaps five minutes the restless movement at stated intervals told him that the trapper chief was descending in safety. Then the strain became easier, and a minute later, an abrupt jerk told him that old Pandy was in the water, for this had been agreed upon before he started, as the signal to proclaim the success of his venture.

Leaving our friends for a short time upon the bluff, with the Indians preparing for desperate work, we will follow the valiant old ranger and see how his mission succeeded.

Pandy was wise enough to slide down the rope slowly and cautiously so that his hands would not be cut. After once leaving the verge, he plunged into darkness that grew deeper with every yard of his descent.

Unknown perils surrounded him on all sides, but as they were unseen, they did not trouble him much, and the good fortune that generally accompanied the old ranger, did not desert him on this occasion.

It was a wonder that Roaring Ralph and his two friends had not thought of this means of escape when brought to bay in the rocky fort at the time of which mention has been made before. Perhaps they did but were unable to muster sufficient length of rope, for it could not have been fear that prevented their attempting it, for all of them were perfect dare-devils.

The descent of the old ranger was just as systematic as the generality of his acts. By short passages he descended into the depths of the abyss. At times the rope seemed inclined to

twirl a little, but he prevented this from assuming any alarming proportions by putting out one hand and touching the wall whenever it was possible, in this manner steadying himself.

That he was drawing near the bottom of the wild gulch, was soon made manifest; not through his sight, for all was dark as Egypt around him, but the roaring of the river among the rocks of the defile had gradually become louder, until it was almost deafening in the ears of the old ranger.

His feet touched the water, and then he was wholly immersed in the chilling stream. He still retained hold of the rope, and intended doing so until he found a place to rest his feet. This was quickly discovered, and the old ranger stood up to his breast in the yellow water of the upper Missouri.

His feet rested on sand, and feeling confident that he could walk along near the shore until he came to some point where an escape might be made from this black defile, he gave the signal with the rope that had been agreed upon, and then let it go. Then commenced the tedious passage down the stream. He kept close to the rocky wall, expecting that the water would be most shallow there, but he knew nothing of the current of the river. At times he would only be knee deep and confidently expecting to reach dry land when another minute would find him up to his neck in the foaming water, and only retaining his footing with difficulty.

Once, indeed, during this perilous passage, he lost his footing completely, and was actually obliged to swim, although this was a pretty hard thing to do under the circumstances. The mad water bore him along with frightful velocity, and Pandy did his best to stem the current.

Fortunately he struck against a rock that lay in the channel, and this enabled him to get his feet once more on the sandy bed of the stream. It seemed as though this was the culminating point of his desperate adventure, for, after regaining his breath, and once more starting on, every foot of the way took him further out of the water until he was splashing along with only a few inches of the flood under him.

The aspect of the banks had also changed materially since his immersion, and they no longer rose up on either hand bold and abrupt, but from where he stood he could see the trees upon the mountain, and the moonlight upon the rocks further up its side.

A few minutes later and Pandy determined to get out of the river and continue his journey on dry land. Leaving him hastening on we will return once more to the rocky fort.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EARTHQUAKE ON A SMALL SCALE.

WHEN the slacking of the rope told Bolly Wherrit that his old chum had risked everything, he lay down, with his head over the chasm.

Below him all was as black as Egypt, and he could not have seen Pandy, had the latter been only a couple of yards below him. The roar of the angry water reached the ears of the listening ranger, but as the minutes passed on he was agreeably disappointed about hearing some cry from below that would proclaim the fact of Pandy's having gotten into trouble.

At length he arose to his feet, and returned to his post, feeling pretty confident that Pandy would get off, even though he failed to find the expected assistance.

The sound of tomahawks could still be heard as dozens of the determined Sioux worked steadily in the little grove of trees, and the beleaguered knew very well what they were up to, for Roaring Ralph had informed them as to the means employed by the Indians to get close to the rocks before making their dash, on the previous occasion. Indeed, some of the logs that had formed their breastworks could still be seen among the rocks, the rest having probably been used for firewood, at various times, by parties who camped in this strange natural fort.

In an hour or so then, they might expect the assault to begin. They would all fight desperately, and make a good use of their weapons, but how would it end? Knowing the strength and determined nature of their enemies, Bolly could not feel positive about their coming out of the fight unharmed, or even coming out at all, when it came to a fine point.

A dozen times he looked over to where May sat, and wished very heartily that she was safe in the fort. For the danger itself the hunter cared very little, as he had been bred in an atmosphere of battle and had probably been on the war-path as soon as he was able to lift a rifle.

There was one, however, who actually seemed to get some enjoyment out of the fact that the same tactics which had been used with such fatal effect before, were about to be brought into requisition again, and this individual was no other than the strange ranger of the Colorado canyon, Roaring Ralph Rockwood.

Several times he chuckled audibly, in a way that was mysterious, to say the least, much to the amazement of his friends who could not understand what he meant.

Meanwhile the moon had been rising higher in the heavens, lighting up every rock upon which her beams fell, with marvelous distinctness. The night was slowly passing. Perhaps an hour had gone by since Pandey had lowered himself into the black gulf.

Roaring Ralph, who had been listening intently, at length declared that the chopping had been discontinued, and the probability was that in less than half an hour the assault would begin.

Then he vanished from their gaze. Where he went none of them could tell, but Bolly, upon looking around for the queer old ranger, was surprised to find him missing. Some fifteen minutes later he heard a chuckle close at his side, and turning his head, beheld Roaring Ralph within a few feet of him, busily engaged in doing up his knapsack, which he had opened during his absence.

What the mysterious old fellow was about Bolly could not for the life of him guess, nor did he have the time given him, for, just at this moment a cry from Powder Flash, who had kept a sharp watch, even while he tugged and tumbled with his venison, to the admiration of Blue Beans, announced that the Sioux had once more made their appearance.

It was a genuine stockade that came in sight, being some twenty feet long and about five in height. The Indians had exercised considerable ingenuity in framing this breastwork from the small trees cut down, and lashed together.

Bolly saw it move into view with dismay plainly marked upon his features, and his exclamation of consternation was echoed by his comrades. Behind this stockade fully fifty braves could hide until it was within ten feet of the fort, when a few bounds would suffice for them to reach the rangers without suffering much loss.

"What had we better do, ole 'coon? Ye seem ter enjoy the affair. S'posin' ye take charge, Rally? I own I'm good fur nothing. Only way I see air ter rush out an' meet 'em on the level," said Bolly, despairingly.

"He! he! Bolly, that would be all-fired good, now. Crawlers and catamounts! look ter me fur deliverance. I'm a rearin', tearin' thunderbolt from ther Colorado canyon; that's me, Roarin' Ralph Rockwood, you bet! I've settled their hash, chop me inter mince-meat an' chuck me inter a sugar hog'shead if I ain't. They won't never git here, Bolly, he! he!"

By dint of persuasion, after the queer old fellow's merriment had in some degree subsided, Bolly managed to learn the facts of the case, and such was his revulsion of feeling that he almost felt like jumping up and dancing or doing something equally as demented.

I have said before that the old ranger from the Colorado canyon had been so disgusted at the success of the first assault under cover of a stockade, that he had resolved to be prepared for just such an emergency, should it ever occur again at any time, which resolve might in part account for the queer knapsack he carried upon his back, in which sundry articles were kept.

From a friend of his who was of a chemical turn of mind, he had procured several explosive torpedoes, which, though small in size were of a tremendous power, being composed among other things of dynamite. There was a cap connected with each one and a hammer, so that all that was necessary to cause an explosion after the thing had been gotten in readiness was to pull a little cord.

This cord Roaring Ralph now held in his hand. Taking advantage of the situation, he had crept out along the line of rocks, and set one of his torpedoes at a point quite a little distance from the fort and over which the Indians would come with their movable stockade, as it was the only clear path forward.

The young girl was already in a secure place, and the men hastened to hide among the rocks so as to have a point of observation, while at the same time they would be safe from the effects of the expected explosion.

During this time the Indians had made good progress. Those behind the stockade seemed to lift it in some way, and carrying it forward, get

over a good deal of ground before setting it down again. As they drew nearer the rock fort, they became more cautious in their actions, and hence the speed of their advance was greatly diminished.

"Trowsers an' tomcats! keep an eye on the critters, Bolly, an' ye'll see the funniest sight that ever was. I reckon the old thing'll fall over with the shock, and the boyees must send in enough lead ter fill 'em full. Dust my Sunday breeches! here she goes. Now!"

As the old Colorado ranger spoke the last word, he gave the cord he held a sharp jerk. The effect was simply tremendous. There was a dull, heavy sound that seemed to make the rocks tremble, although it had none of the sharp explosive qualities of a cannon discharge.

A great upheaval took place. The rough stockade was lifted several feet and thrown violently to the ground. A dozen Indians, or parts of them rather, soared through space, and many others were thrown down and sadly wounded. While the remainder of the brave gang stood, lost in wonder and amazement, the sharp crack of a rifle rung out, and the leaden messenger found a lodging-place in the body of a warrior, who quickly pitched forward upon his face.

The rest of the beleaguered garrison were not long in following this well-set example of old Roaring Ralph, and the rattle of rifles soon brought the Indians to their senses, and made them realize the new danger that threatened.

Then there was scattering in hot haste. Some ran toward the rocks, hoping to gain their shelter, but these immediately became the targets of the deadly revolver, and not one warrior managed to reach his destination alive.

Those who bolted away and ran for dear life toward the distant points where their comrades, full of horror and dismay, were gathered, proved to be more fortunate, as the revolvers of the pale-faces could not reach them, and most of their rifles were empty. Only Bolly, with the repeating gun of Pandey Ellis, sent bullet after bullet among the demoralized Indians so long as they kept in a compact body, and it was only by separating and dodging in a most ludicrous manner that they made him refrain from firing.

"Bears' claws an' buffler-hoofs! don't they get over ground lively now? H'ist me inter a 'Pache's grave but that ther leetle affair war mighty interestin' now," chuckled old Ralph.

"Roarin' Ralph, ye've saved us all!" declared Bolly Wherret, enthusiastically.

"May I be chawed up by an alligator, an' roasted on ther end o' a two-pronged pitchfork if I don't believe ye're right, Bolly. Painters an' powder-horns! did ye see them pieces o' Injuns a-flyin' thro' ther air?" and Ralph gave a whistle to indicate the rest.

Satisfied that the attempt to assail them would not be repeated after this terrible disaster, the friends could rest in peace. It was quite evident that the Indians were very much excited over the affair, for they could be seen riding to and fro in a wild manner, and it was fully an hour before they became quiet again. They would now endeavor to try the virtue of starvation upon the besieged.

Thus the night passed away. The moon sunk lower in the heavens, and at length a gray line along the eastern horizon proclaimed the coming of dawn. When the sun arose, the rangers collected some of the old pieces of logs and built quite a respectable fire, at which breakfast was cooked.

Their horses were hungry but there was not a bite for them to eat. Water was procured in small quantities from the river by means of the long rope, and a little tin can one of the hunters happened to have with him.

It was along toward noon when Rocky Mountain Joe directed the attention of all toward the Indians. There seemed to be a commotion among them. Then the distant music of a cavalry bugle sounding the "charge" was heard. Following this came the rattle of carbines and revolvers, and the mounted troops were seen in pursuit of the fleeing and bewildered Indians.

A single horseman came galloping toward the rock fort, accompanied by a man on foot, who took huge bounds that served to keep him even with the soldier's steed. In this latter all recognized brave old Pandey Ellis. The horseman was no other than Colonel Halsey.

Harry Belmont went out to meet him, determined to confess his folly and beg the forgiveness of the man whom he had wronged. To his amazement the colonel clasped him in his arms and pressed him to his heart. They remained alone conversing for almost half an hour. When they came in Harry's face was as white as snow,

and as he bent down to kiss May, he whispered: "My sister!"

The true state of affairs and the colonel's secret were soon made known. Harry Belmont was his own son and May's half-brother. The colonel's first wife had died when the little boy was only a year old. Harry was never told the true state of the case as it was a delicate subject with the officer, but his quick mind understood that his mother had left her husband and ran off with a lover, taking her babe with her. Before half a year had gone she came home to die. The colonel forgave her, but that none of the shame might attach itself to the child, he had Harry raised under another name. That the man who had been the cause of this trouble should be terribly punished the colonel swore, and their meeting was a wild one, for they came across each other one stormy night upon the open plain. A terrible fight ensued and in the morning the officer was found beside his dead victim, himself almost devoid of life.

There was only one who heard this news with joy, and this was Jack. The young fellow loved May Hasly dearly but had smothered the flame in his breast until now he saw a path before him that led to Paradise.

Although the Indians had been put to flight, the friends had no desire to linger in this place, and were soon riding down the mountain side. When evening came, Pandey Ellis and his allies left the soldiers and struck off on a trail of their own, intending to carry out the original idea of the veteran.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PANDY ELLIS'S SCALP.

THE bravest and most thoughtful of border-men have their periods of recklessness, when even the cautions that age brings with it are neglected, and the dare-devil spirit that had enthused old Pandey Ellis seemed to take possession of his comrades.

Jack had gone on with the soldiers, for the magnet was too powerful, now that he had a right to love May Hasly, so that the adventurers were but six in number—Powder Flash, still chewing lustily on a remnant of that tough venison, making the half-dozen complete.

They were in no hurry to reach the Indian village, as they desired that the present excitement should die out before the great undertaking should be attempted.

Behold them, then, a few days later, approaching the village in the dusk of the evening. The result of the great slaughter was only apparent in the diminished number of braves, for the death-songs had long since died away, and the chiefs were busily engaged in hatching up plots that would bring them glory and plunder.

After nightfall Powder Flash was gayly decked out in the habiliments of a Sioux warrior whom they had come across and captured. He was persuaded to put his venison aside for the time being, and such were his powers of imitation, that when the chief brought his mind down to the subject the rangers were amazed at the exactness with which he imitated the captured brave. In looks, speech, gestures, and many little peculiarities that his quick eye had caught, he was Howling Coyote all over, and even that individual seemed half-scared at the readiness with which his complete identity was taken away from him.

Matters having been arranged, the chief went boldly into the village, sought the lodge of the great sachem, Buffalo Horn, where he found the equally-famous Red Cloud, and laid before them his news. The old renegade who had Pandey Ellis's scalp in his possession was in the woods close by with his trophy, ready to deliver it if the great chiefs would insure his safety. He had been frightened away by the row that had occurred on the other occasion, but was now on hand again.

A council was immediately called, and, as before, it was quickly decided that they should honestly pay the reward offered for the scalp of their inveterate foe. Powder Flash took part in the council, and was then hastily dispatched for the old renegade.

Pandey Ellis had disguised himself and his voice as before, and boldly followed the chief into the village of his deadly foe. When he took his seat in the council lodge, a chorus of grunts marked the approval of the chiefs.

Then the greatest practical joke on record was enacted. Speeches were made, and to them the renegade replied, telling a long story of how he had waylaid the old hunter chief and shot him, more for the sake of revenge than reward, but that he knew of the proclamation issued by

the great Sioux chieftain, and had determined to profit by it.

Then the gray scalp was produced, and gravely handed over to Buffalo Horn with the dramatic words:

"Behold! this scalp once belonged to Pandey Ellis; now it is yours. The man whose head it adorned will never again trouble the great Sioux nation"—all of which was strictly true, as Pandey intended it should be.

The scalp was gravely passed from hand to hand, many declaring they recognized it as the top-knot of their inveterate foe. Roaring Ralph, against all protestations, had dressed himself out like a Sioux brave, and was just without the lodge, so that he heard most of the talk within. It was as much as the old ranger could do to keep from laughing outright, and during the next half-hour he bottled up enough merriment to last him for years as a solace during his lonely spells.

When all the talking had been done, they came down to the bed-rock, and began to talk about the promised reward; and the council ended by the stipulated price being actually handed over to the white-haired renegade with the strange voice.

The articles were packed under the old joker's own supervision, and struck off from a bill he held in his hand. Fifty valuable black foxskins, one hundred buffalo robes, two hundred beaver pelts, the gun with the silver-dickered stock, and a keg of gunpowder fresh from the hands of the Indian agent at the agency. The barrel of whisky the old fellow declined, telling the chiefs to give it to the warriors and let them have a glorious time while dancing the scalp-dance around the top-knot of their old and inveterate foe.

The articles were nicely packed upon half a dozen mustangs, which were to be left at the agency, for the Indians to reclaim. Refusing all offers of assistance, the supposed renegade drove his mustangs off before the light of day came, for he did not want to be in the village when the sunlight was liable to betray him.

Never were men so thoroughly duped as these credulous chiefs. The remainder of the night was spent in wild orgies, and by the time morning dawned, several more of the squaws were widows as a result of the fights into which the fire-water led the braves.

As for Pandey, he was doubled up as he went away, as if he had been seized with a cramp, but it was with suppressed laughter. The stupendous joke had been successful beyond their wildest expectations. It was strange that the chiefs stuck to their compact, but in reality it took nothing from them individually, and would get them the name of doing things on the square, so that all bordermen would be afraid to incur their hostility for fear of being hounded to death in the same way.

Pandey Ellis refused all offers of company, and gravely bidding the chiefs farewell, after telling them to call on Old Hickory whenever they had another job like this on hand, he went away into the forest with his five laden mustangs.

Hardly had he got beyond the confines of the village, before he was joined by two Indians, one of whom was a remarkable specimen of the aborigine. This was no other than Roaring Ralph Rockwood, and his comrade, who chewed so industriously at something he held in his hand, of course was Powder Flash.

When Bolly Wherret heard the full joke, he came the nearest to dying with the fits and actually turned black in the face, as he looked first at the presents and then at his chum.

There was need of haste, however, for they were in the hot-bed of iniquity, and should the Sioux chiefs discover the deception that had been so successfully practiced upon them, while the white rangers were still in the heart of the Indian country, nothing could save them from the fury of the savages.

By the following night Pandey and his friends had placed many miles between themselves and the lodges of the Sioux, and determined to take things a little more leisurely from that time out.

The old hunter chief was induced by Bolly to have his hair cut, and resume the peculiar expression of countenance that had always distinguished him, by removing most of the hair from his face. Then Richard was himself again, so far as looks were concerned.

They reached the fort at length, and were warmly greeted, for these rangers were known and respected by almost every soldier in the West. When the result of their terrible hoax was known, the wildest enthusiasm prevailed.

News at length reached Buffalo Horn that old

Pandey was alive and well; and, too, that it was he who had won the reward.

At first he would not believe it, but when other runners came in corroborating the story and saying that they had it from the lips of old Pandey Ellis himself, the sachem ground his teeth and swore a fearful oath to the effect that Heavy Knife should not live another moon.

One attempt was made to murder the old hunter, but the would-be assassin, caught in the very act, after his bullet had whizzed by within an inch of Pandey's head, turned out to be a half-breed named Dusky Joe, the identical man who had written the proclamation in regard to Pandey's scalp.

He refused to say a word in regard to his intentions or employers, but the rangers knew full well that he had been hired by Buffalo Horn, and ten minutes later the body of Dusky Joe was dangling from the nearest tree.

From that time, Pandey had no attempt made upon his life, by a hired assassin at least, and is, to this day, the most renowned ranger of the plains.

The events chronicled in this story occurred only a short time ago, and all of our characters are still in the land of the living.

I am glad to say, Powder-Flash did, in the end, manage to accomplish the great task he had set about doing, and felt, when the last remnant of the tough venison had vanished, as if he had become a hero. The chief is at present with his tribe, and I believe Pandey and Bolly were with him at last accounts.

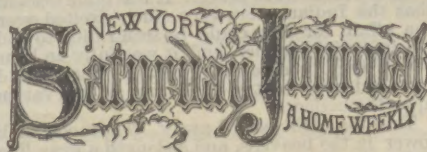
Blue Beans, together with Roaring Ralph and Rocky Mountain Joe, are scouting somewhere in the North-west, where the hostiles have been making things lively of late, and if General Howard knows their worth, he will find most valuable coadjutors in these veterans of the plains. Their lives have been spent in the West, and although all of them are now in comfortable circumstances, they could not live away from the scene of so many of their adventures.

It was some time before Harry Belmont could come to look on May as a sister, but time works wonders. The gallant officer was lately married to a young beauty from the East, and at the same time Jack Holmes took May Hasly for his bride—his earnest devotion having been rewarded.

He was a wealthy man in his own right, and is now living in St. Louis, where the general often visits.

Buffalo Horn never recovered from the effects of the terrible joke that Pandey played upon him, as Old Hickory, and drank himself into the grave. It might be well perhaps if some daring hunter should attempt the same thing with his compatriot, Sitting Bull.

THE END.



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